



[See page 40.]

'MANOR. COOMB'Ē

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'THE GOLD OF THAT LAND,' 'THE ONE TALENT,' ETC

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MANOR COOMBE

CHAPTER I

CINDER ELLA

‘**C**ONTINENTAL time-tables are really exasperatingly confusing!’ exclaimed Frances Wilmott, a handsome girl of about twenty, who was impatiently turning over the leaves of the Bradshaw which lay beside her breakfast-plate. No one replying to this remark, the speaker with knitted brows continued her study of the long lines of figures, among whose labyrinths she hunted with determined perseverance for the connexion she wished to find. With a second murmur of impatience she lifted her head at last, and looked across the table to where her younger sister, the fair Beatrice, was languidly dividing her attention between her cup of coffee and an illustrated magazine of fashions which the post had just brought her. ‘Bee, I do wish you would exert your brains, if you have any to spare from your present study, and help me to map out our Swiss route. I really do not see why I should have all the trouble of this myself.’

Pretty Beatrice was saved the exertion of replying by her small brother, who took that office upon himself. 'It's all quite fair, Fan. If you've got double brains—and you know that's part of your creed—then, of course, they ought to do double work. Surely your pile of brains must see the logic of that.'

Frances swallowed down this speech with a hurried mouthful of cold coffee, and returned to her calculations. 'Mother,' she said presently, keeping her finger on the column she was studying, 'it is clear we must break our journey somewhere. So much I can make out; and I think it had better be at Paris, don't you?' There was no reply from the lady at the head of the table, and her daughter, still keeping her finger on the page, looked up inquiringly. 'Why, mother, what is wrong?' she asked, struck by the look, partly annoyance, partly dismay, on her mother's face. 'Have you had bad news?'

Mrs. Wilmott laid down the letter she had been reading. 'Bad news, indeed! This note is from Mr. Audley, telling of the failure of another of our investments.'

'Not a great loss this time, I hope?' quickly interposed the elder daughter, sharp anxiety in her tone, while Beatrice looked up with suddenly awakened interest.

'Enough to put a stop to our going abroad this summer, that is quite clear!'

'Give up our Swiss tour? Impossible!' exclaimed both girls at once, while Frances added, in the tone

of authority to which the members of her family were accustomed, 'Unless the loss is considerable I do not see why we should have to give up Switzerland. Except for the expense of still having Ella, we have been living fairly economically during the past year.'

Her mother shrugged her shoulders. 'Unfortunately that additional expense is a burden which is not to be easily got rid of now, I fear; and truly it amounts to more than is pleasant, or than I had calculated upon, I confess.' A slight cough at the further end of the room caused the speaker to start slightly. Recovering herself immediately, however, she went on wholly undisturbed. 'I did not know you were in the room, Ella. But, since you have heard what I said, I hope it will only serve to make you more grateful than you have hitherto shown yourself for my kindness.' There was no reply. Mrs. Wilmott, a slight shade of annoyance on her face, hesitated for an instant or two, uncertain apparently whether or not to attempt to soften her remarks. But as her eyes fell on her lawyer's letter, it recalled a trouble which drove all minor unpleasantnesses out of her mind, and in the consideration of monetary difficulties she was no longer disturbed by the slight feeling of embarrassment which she had experienced on discovering that her remark to Frances had been overheard by another.

'There,' she exclaimed with a worried sigh, as she handed the lawyer's note to her elder daughter, 'you may read it for yourself. It is quite clear

we shall have to content ourselves with Margate, or St. Leonard's for the hot months. It is most vexatious!'

'Margate!' echoed Beatrice, in tones of mingled dismay and contempt. 'Impossible! These places were all very well when we were at the age for paddling, and in the days before the shopkeeper class had succeeded in turning our seaside resorts during "the season" into mere promenades for the vulgar mob.' With pouting lips she looked to her sister to echo these sentiments, and declare Margate out of the question. But Frances, with knitted brows, was considering the unwelcome announcement of the man of business with even a fuller comprehension than her mother's of its serious nature. She heard her sister, but she did not reply. With her clever calculating head, she was considering ways and means, and slowly the disagreeable conviction was forcing itself upon her that for once her unpractical mother had jumped to a right conclusion - the Continent for this year was out of the question.

Her two brothers at the other end of the table, having finished their breakfast, were wrangling school-boy fashion while they put together their books preparatory to starting for school. In the midst of their jangling Beatrice's grumble reached them, and she was still further exasperated by Lance's statement, that she did not know in the very least what she was talking about. Margate was the jolliest place in the world, full of penny peep-shows, and boats, and fish, and Punch and Judys, and niggers.

Mrs. Wilmott had not heard her daughter's peevish appeal. In the endeavour to drive Mr. Audley's disagreeable news from her mind, she had mechanically taken up another letter which had lain unopened beside her plate. The writing, a man's cramped hand, was difficult to read. She set herself to decipher it, at first with half listless impatience, but she had not made out half a page before she became absorbed. At last a sudden exclamation broke from her.

'Girls! Girls! Here is good news indeed to set against the bad! This note is from your Uncle Vincent, and it contains an invitation for you both to spend the summer with him at Manor Coombe. Nor is this all. He mentions Mrs. Forrtreaves—I remember her, a worthy creature; but she must be as old as the hills, for she has been his housekeeper and general factotum in India and everywhere from time immemorial,—now he says she is somewhat failing. The care of that great country house, an old family place down in North Devon, you know, is becoming too heavy a responsibility for her, and your uncle hints at the probability of his choosing one of his nieces to remain with him as mistress of the establishment.'

This was certainly a very free translation of the writer's passing reference to his solitary old bachelor condition, but it pleased Mrs. Wilmott to put upon her brother-in-law's words an interpretation which she fondly anticipated would be made good later on by the force of her daughters' charms.

The girls' eyes sparkled. They had never seen their father's brother, Vincent, who had lately returned from India, where he had amassed a huge fortune; but in virtue of the many and costly gifts which from time to time he had sent to his nieces and nephews, he had all unconsciously to himself posed to them as the fairy prince of their youthful imaginations. And now, on this communication of their mother's, the girls' hearts beat fast at the thought of the future and its possibilities, and on the instant each of the sisters, the one no less ardently than the other, resolved to play her part so as to be the chosen favourite. And already in eager fancy they were picturing to themselves the time when, as the adopted daughter of the house, they should queen it at lovely Manor Coombe.

These delightful castle-buildings in the air were interrupted by a second exclamation from their mother, who had been rapidly scanning the latter part of her letter. 'Really, Vincent is wonderfully considerate for a crotchety old bachelor!' she cried. 'Apparently he wants you all. This is what he says—"Let the boys come too, and of course poor Cousin Isobel's little girl, who, I think, has been living with you now for the past two years. Children are not much in my line, to be sure, but Mrs Forrtreaves will see to their wants, and I doubt not they will find plenty of scope for their energies at the Manor. That will leave you free, Florence, to shut up your house, and pay your Scotch visits unfettered by family encumbrances."'

But at this point the reading was interrupted by loud cheers of delight from the two boys, Charlie and Lance, which wellnigh drowned the girls' expressions of mingled annoyance and dismay.

Sharply silencing her brothers, Frances turned to her mother, saying, with decision, 'Our visit will be completely spoilt if we go in a batch of five. If Uncle Vincent, as he seems to say, is not fond of children, it is more than likely that in a month's time he will have had enough of ours, and be glad to get rid of the whole five of us at once.'

'I am sure Fan is right, mother,' chimed in Beatrice, querulously. 'You have no idea the mischief these boys are up to when they are left to themselves; and of course Ella is of no use. She only makes them worse.'

'It cannot be helped,' was her mother's short rejoinder. 'Your uncle is a kind-hearted man. I will say that for him. But he is very determined in his own opinions, and in many ways exceedingly peculiar. I never could get on with him. His' eccentricities I found too trying. Even as a boy he was never like other people. Later in life he was still the same incomprehensible being, full of the most unconventional and impossible ideas. The most extraordinary stories are told of him in India. Among others that, just when he was at the height of his fame as a medical man, he threw up a magnificent appointment in favour of a needy acquaintance, and retired himself to his tea-plantations, where he gave himself up to the study of his crops and the medical supervision of the coolie

population of the district. It is as well, girls, that you should not be ignorant of your uncle's character, for, if he is the man I knew years ago, you will have to study his eccentricities if you wish to please him. When he takes a notion into his head, remember, he must at all costs be humoured. For instance, were I to write now declining his invitation to the children, it is more than likely he would reply by the curt announcement that he would have five or none. Ella, of course, must understand that she is going for the purpose of keeping the boys amused and out of your uncle's way. I dare say it is because Vincent thought she might be useful for that purpose that he included her in the invitation. Do you hear, Ella?

An inarticulate murmur of assent came from a distant corner of the room, where a slight little figure, dressed in shabby black, stood book in hand by the window. She was a sad-looking child, about thirteen years of age, with dark eyes that seemed too large for her thin small face, whose extreme paleness was intensified by contrast with the heavy masses of raven black hair that reached almost to her waist in glossy elf-locks. The face, in spite of its unhealthy pallor and painfully sharpened features, might still have laid claim to some attractiveness had it not been for its utter want of animation. And yet that expression of languid listlessness was not, as might be supposed, natural to the girl, in proof of which there were moments when those sad dreamy eyes, stirred by some unwonted excitement, would sparkle with fun

or flash with indignation in a manner that transformed the child almost beyond recognition. It was this apparently double-sidedness of her nature—her spirits now smouldering dully, now aglow with latent fire—that had won for Isobel Elphinstone the name of Cinder Ella from her two cousins, Charlie and Lance Wilmott.

Two years before our story opens, the little Isobel, or Ella as she was generally called, had suddenly found herself, on the death of her mother, a penniless orphan, alone in the world. Her uncle, and only near relative, Mr. Archibald Wilmott, considered that he did more than his duty by his sister's child when he carried her back with him after the funeral to his own house, a fashionable residence in Cavendish Square, London. Utterly crushed with grief at the loss of her mother, and chilled in the loveless atmosphere of her new home, where by her aunt and cousins at least she was made to feel herself unwelcome, the little girl drooped and pined like a delicate plant when suddenly transplanted from sheltered sunniness and exposed to the withering blast of the ice-bound North. And when her uncle, the only link between her and her mother, died suddenly from the result of an accident within a month of Ella's coming to London, the little girl's feeling of desolation was complete, and the sorrowful little heart ached with a still more hopeless longing for the old happy days that were gone, gone never to return. With the sensitiveness of one accustomed only to love and the tenderest consideration, Ella instinctively recoiled

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from the cold looks and words which were now her daily portion ; and the once bright, open child, full of life and spirit, changed rapidly into the silent girl, shrinking distrustfully from strangers, and subject at times to fits of moody irritability. By her aunt and cousins she was considered sulky and ungrateful, and they would gladly have rid themselves of the burden of her maintenance had they but known how they might with decency have done so. As it was, they took little or no notice of the poor child, except when it suited them to make use of her, which they were ready enough to do. For the rest, they contented themselves with leaving her to the care of servants, to be befriended or neglected as the case might be. Even the boys, taking their cue from their mother and sisters, openly expressed their supreme contempt for their cousin as a cry-baby-good-for-nothing, a being whom it was legitimate for them to tease and torment to the uttermost limit of their inventive powers.

And thus the months dragged on wearily. Then came a change, a change fraught with gladness for the lonely Isobel. She was in church one Sunday morning. The officiating clergyman was a stranger whose face attracted Ella, and when, in the course of his sermon, he spoke a word to the children, she listened with suddenly awakened interest. It was only the old, old story of Jesus and His love ; but Ella heard it that day as if for the first time in her life. When she got home, she crept up to her own little room at the top of the house, and throwing

herself on her knees by the bed, covered her face with her hands.

‘Oh, mother, mother!’ she sobbed, ‘when I had you it seemed as if I needed nobody else. But I haven’t you now. I haven’t anybody to belong to. Oh, I wonder if God would really take me and let me belong to Him?’

And before she rose from her knees, Isobel knew by the strange peace and gladness which came to her that her Father in heaven had heard and answered the cry of her lonely heart. And so it was that Isobel Elphinstone’s life became changed, and that for the better. Outwardly she was the same child, with a grave stillness unlike her years; but deep down in her heart she possessed the secret of a joyousness more real, more lasting, than any she had known even in the old happy days with her precious mother. It must not be thought, however, that life had no longer any shadows for her. There were times when she grieved almost to despair over her own faultiness; times when she doubted if such as she could really belong to the Lord Jesus Christ at all; times, too, when the loneliness and lovelessness of her present surroundings pressed so heavily that all spirit and gladness would have been utterly crushed out had it not been for the thought, which never wholly forsook her, that she did belong to God, and that He cared for her.

She was fighting down a bitter heart-ache now, as she stood at the dining-room window that bright June morning, moodily watching the passers-by, and

, trying to forget her aunt's hard-spoken words. The clock struck nine, and at the sound she turned to leave the room in order to get ready for school, when her cousin Frances' voice arrested her.

'Uncle Vincent must be a strange man. Can you recollect any more of his peculiarities, mother? Does he hold any singular religious views? Forewarned is forearmed, you know.' The girl had resolved that she should be the chosen niece; and, with the shrewdness of a clever manœuvrer, she realized that, in order to win her uncle's favour, she must be on her guard against running counter to any of his foibles.

Again her mother shrugged her shoulders expressively. 'In old times the name of Vincent Wilmott's peculiarities was legion, and, judging by his letters and public report, I should say he has not changed for the better in respect of his oddities. About his religious opinions, however, I am more in the dark. When last I saw him he was little better than a free-thinker. He had even the bad taste openly to proclaim himself an infidel, and in good society such reckless defiance of religious conventionality leads frequently to awkwardness. But Vincent cared not a straw for public opinion. But there, I am tired of the subject, and it is time, besides, that we considered the dresses Bee and you will require for this all-important visit.'

Leaving for the present the question of the master of Manor Coombe's eccentricities, the three ladies became absorbed in an animated discussion over the

respective merits of costumes suitable for gaieties in the country. Ella did not listen. The subject would no doubt have interested her personally had there been any probability that her scanty wardrobe would be taken into consideration. But she knew it would most likely not even be remembered. As yet happily the thought had not come to her that her shabby outfit, which was a source of mortification to her even at the second-rate school to which her aunt had sent her, would prove a still greater trial to her pride among the fashionable guests at Manor Coombe. Still standing by the window, Ella had fallen into a troubled reverie. She was roused by a sudden assault of bread-pills aimed full in her face. Following his pellets came Master Lancelot Wilmott, and not far behind him his elder brother Charlie, an open-faced boy, about Ella's own age.

'Ho, there, Cinder Ella! Do you hear, mother says it's to be your business in Devonshire to keep us out of mischief. How are you going to set about it—say, you black Cinder?' demanded Lance. 'What would you do if I told you I was going to stick three pins up to their heads in Uncle Vincent's pet cat? I know he has a Persian one. Say—what would you do to hinder me?'

Ella turned upon him with sudden spirit. 'I would leave that to the cat. She would show you when you had put your first pin halfway in.' But with that the momentary flash of fun died out of her eyes, her head drooped again, and, with her face dull and listless as before, she studied the walls of the opposite

houses, seeming not to hear Lance's remark as he walked off, that he 'would kill the cat outright if he had a mind to, and put the corpse in her brush-and-comb bag.'

'What are you looking so glum for, Cinder?' demanded Charlie, thrusting a torn glove and his mother's work-basket towards his cousin with a significant nod. 'I'm sure,' he went on, balancing himself on the arm of a chair while he watched Ella's quick fingers repair the great rent; 'I'm sure all those four weeks last summer that we three frizzled and steamed by turns down at Margate, you were like to jump out of your skin with delight at being near the sea. And yet four days out of six it poured in torrents, and we were cooped up in a stuffy little hole of a lodging with that ass Baker, and a grumpy landlady, and an everlasting odour of cabbage boiling, and Lancs like a hedgehog all the time. And you declared the sea made up for everything. Well, this will be the same, don't you see, only a thousand times jollier. Uncle Vincent must be an old bear, I suppose. But we don't need to mind him. We'll keep out of his way. And there will be the sea. Mother says it's grand at Devonshire. I've heard you say so yourself. You'd seen pictures or something that told you.'

'The sea!' For an instant Isobel's eyes sparkled, and her pale face flushed. But the next it had sobered again.

'I know it will be jolly. Why don't you think so too?' persisted the boy.

Ella hesitated. It is true that in her present cheerless life she felt so sad and lonely that there were times when she thought that almost any break in the monotony would be a relief. But now, face to face with the prospect of living on sufferance among strangers in a grand house, the home of a man who did not like children—worse still, who did not believe in God—her heart failed her, and, with the shrinking of a shy child, she would fain have chosen to be left behind with a caretaker in the hot London house in Cavendish Square.

Charlie misunderstood her hesitation. 'I shan't plague you much, except when rainy days come and I've really not another blessed thing in the whole wide world to do,' he said reassuringly. 'And if that imp, Lance, bullies you, you know I can soon settle him.'

Isobel smiled. In truth, the office of caretaker of the two boys was less appalling to her than might have been expected. It is true that Lance, the spoilt pet of his mother, was the torment of her life, but his rude, exacting selfishness seldom nowadays reached the pitch of unbearableness, thanks to Charlie, his elder brother. Charlie was a tease himself, but he liked to see fair play. Moreover, his cousin had not long been a member of the household before he discovered her powers of story-telling and general helpfulness to fellows in scrapes. His nature, much more generous than Lancelot's, had from the first refused to return the little girl's gentle favours with churlish meannesses. Little by little the two cousins had

come to a better understanding and appreciation of one another. Ella, keenly conscious of the change in Charlie's behaviour towards her, was most thankful for his attitude of boyish friendliness, and in many practical ways was able to show her gratitude. As for Charlie, he had formally installed himself as represser-in-chief of Lancelot's bullying talents, and in the exercise of the functions of his office, Cinder Ella's champion found daily occupation. Not only so, but on more than one occasion he had electrified his mother and sisters by publicly standing up for his down-trodden cousin, in defiance of the family principle of ignoring and neglecting her as the household drudge.

Interpreting Ella's smile to mean that, in consideration of the alleviating circumstances he had mentioned, the prospects of North Devon were now less gloomy, Charlie continued: 'Which of the girls do you think that old ogre of an uncle will choose to make mistress of Manor Coombe? Lance says Bee, because she's the prettiest; but I say Fan, because she's so horribly clever. Mother says Uncle Vincent can't bear anything ugly or stupid. But I say, Ella, I thought, didn't you? that infidels were like the heathen, and that if they were our relations, we had to pray for them and be ashamed of them, and not go visiting them. But I forgot, you don't need to mind. You're not Uncle Vincent's niece, as Fan and we all are, worse luck. And yet I don't see why we shouldn't have a rarely jolly time, if we just take precious good care to keep out of the old ogre's way, and

leave the coast clear for Fan and Bee. I wish, I'm sure I wish her joy of her prospects, whichever is chosen to live with the master of Manor Coombe. I'd as soon myself chum with the polar bear in the Zoo.'

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CHAPTER II

THE VALLEY OF ROCKS

I SAY, Ella, whatever has happened to you? Since we came to Devonshire, you've grown a different creature from yourself. Hasn't she, Lance?'

It was after breakfast one morning, and Ella and the boys had betaken themselves to a favourite resort of theirs—a rustic summerhouse in the kitchen garden—where they usually met to consult with each other over their plans for the day.

'The Cinder's growing almost as jolly as a boy!' was Lancelot's surprisingly gracious answer.

Isobel's low laugh was her only reply to Charlie. She knew the boys were right, for she felt herself to be a different being from what she was in London. It was but a week since she and her cousins had arrived at Manor Coombe, but already these few days had transformed Ella astonishingly.

She could not have explained to herself, much less to any one else, the change that had come over her. There were indeed several causes at work. In the first place, the girl's passionate love of the beautiful,

which, like other and deeper affections still, had been starved of late in the dreary London life, into which there entered so little of the picturesque, was now being satisfied. From her mother and from books she had learnt to anticipate something of the wild grandeur of the North Devonshire coast, which had been the scene of Mrs. Elphinstone's girlhood; but not even her wildest imaginings had pictured the magnificence of the reality, and at times she was fairly lifted out of her quiet self in an outburst of ecstatic delight.

As she rambled with the boys by the seaside, or among the woods and glens around Manor Coombe, she was having daily feasts for her beauty-loving eyes. Now it was the wild, awe-inspiring grandeur of the rock-bound coast, and now the rich sweep of hill and dale exquisitely coloured with the softly blending tints of early summer. And while she gazed her fill of sea and woodland pictures, her eyes would lose their look of pensive sadness, and a faint tinge of pink would colour her pale thin cheeks.

But underneath, and deeper than her keen enjoyment of nature was her happy sense of freedom. Away from her aunt's cold looks and words, she felt like a bird escaped from a cage. For every one was kind at Manor Coombe. Ah! how much that glad fact had to do with her enjoyment of her surroundings! Figuratively, as well as literally, she drew in with deep breaths the sweet, pure air of the free earth around her, and under this powerful though silent influence her crushed spirits began slowly to expand,

and her naturally bright temperament under these more favourable circumstances showed signs of re-asserting itself. But, even had she fully understood what all this had to do with her lightness of heart, it was a subject upon which she could not well have entered with her cousins.

Accordingly, as there seemed no answer forthcoming to his question, Charlie was obliged to furnish himself with one, and in so doing 'ne hit the nail more straightly on the head than he imagined. 'It's because this place is so scrumptiously jolly, you can't help liking it and feeling jolly too.'

Lance had been so occupied with the renovation of an old fishing-rod he had picked up that morning, that hitherto he had not found leisure to bestow upon his cousin even a few of the rude speeches which, as a rule, he always kept in stock for her benefit. He hastened now to make up for lost time. 'When we go back to town, Cinder Ella, will you be your nice or your nasty self again?' he asked, with cynical significance. 'You ought to be nicer in London than here, for Uncle Vincent only gives you food and a bed, and mother gives you all that and clothes as well.'

'Cad!', wrathfully burst forth Charlie, making a rush at his brother.

Isobel's cheeks burned. She never got hardened to her tormentor's taunting reminders of her dependent position, and she would not have been sorry just then to have Charlie teach Master Lancelot a lesson. But dread of Dr. Wilmott's appearing on

the scene forced her to interfere as peacemaker. 'Never mind him, Charlie. I don't—at least not so much when you are by. Listen, both of you. I have an idea in my head for to-day, but I've not thought it out. While you run down and see whether you can find any ripe fruit in the strawberry beds—you know, Mrs. Forstreaves said we might—I shall think, and be ready when you come back.'

Left to herself Isobel fulfilled her promise in the letter, if not in the spirit. She fell a-thinking. But her mind wandered from the immediate present. Charlie's words, 'It's such a jolly place,' were but the boyish echo of her own thought; and with her head leaning on her hand, she became absorbed in the happy realization of how wonderfully her fears of but a week ago had been disappointed with regard to Manor Coombe and its dreaded master.

With vivid clearness she recalled her apprehensions on that first evening of their arrival at the Manor. It was already dusk when the London travellers had found themselves at the end of their long railway journey. Little was to be seen from the windows of the close carriage that awaited them at the railway station which was the nearest point to Manor Coombe. Wedged in between the two boys on the front seat of the carriage, Ella was weary enough to have followed their example and gone to sleep, had it not been for a nervous dread of the unknown which kept her feverishly awake. The drive was a long one, and she had worked herself into a perfect fever of anxious excitement by the time the wheels, grating on the

deep gravel, roused the boys, and told them they were driving up the avenue to the house.

Ten minutes later, and the coachman had drawn up in front of a handsome flight of stone steps leading to the entrance hall of Manor Coombe, a fine old mansion of Elizabethan times. Confused and dazzled by the light from the hall door, which had been flung wide open, Ella had caught but a glimpse of the exterior of the building, which to her startled eyes appeared as imposing as Buckingham Palace. Shrink- ing behind her cousins, she had glanced timidly at the gentleman who had come forward to greet his guests. At first sight the master of Manor Coombe, with his tall and still erect figure, somewhat sternly set features, and quick commanding voice, seemed a formidable personage. Had Isobel but had the courage, however, to look closer, she would have been reassured by the sight of a smile which subdued the expression of the keen black eyes, and softened the determined lines of the mouth, half-hidden by its iron- grey moustache. Still further embarrassed by the sight of a number of gaily-dressed visitors, who flocked into the hall, and welcomed her cousins with every demonstration of pleasure, poor Ella had shrunk further and further into the background, hardly con- scious in her shy confusion that Dr. Wilmott's cordial greeting to her and the boys was a reception which somewhat belied his reputed aversion to children.

The next morning, acting on his nieces' assurances that Isobel and the boys were unsociable beings, who preferred to live their lives apart, he had done his

• best to put them at their ease. He had told them to consider Manor Coombe as Liberty Hall, and after introducing them to his good housekeeper, Mrs Forreaves, describing her as the fairy godmother who could supply all their needs, he had left them to their own devices. Therafter to all appearance, and, as the young people themselves hoped and believed, he had altogether forgotten their existence.

But, all unknown to the trio, he was with much interest and curiosity observing them closely; and it was not long before, with regard to the boys at least, he had formed a shrewd conclusion as to their characters. Of Isobel he had found it much more difficult to judge. Frances had told him that she was an utterly unattractive girl, ungrateful, sulky, and strangely unresponsive, a child in fact, whose redeeming points, if indeed she had any, were exceedingly hard to discover. And to a superficial observer Ella's behaviour might have seemed but to confirm that description. For, with a shrinking remembrance of what she had been more than once coldly reminded by her aunt, that she had been invited to Manor Coombe only because Dr. Wilmott in the circumstances could not well do otherwise, she was burdened with an overmastering sense of shyness in his presence. Her painful sensitiveness so persistently kept her in the background, in spite of her host's attempts to draw her forward, that he was forced, so far at least, to adopt as true the description which had been given of the unresponsiveness of this strange child.

Among the visitors just then staying at the Manor were several of the squire's old Indian friends ; and although his duties as host were greatly lightened by the arrival of his two nieces, who were in their element as hostesses, he was perforce so much occupied that, during the first week after the Wilmotts' arrival, the children, to their own secret satisfaction, were thrown pretty much on their own resources under the care of Mrs. Fortreaves, a kind old soul who had from the first taken a great fancy to little Miss Isobel, whose timid shyness had instinctively given way before the housekeeper's motherly kindness.

The weather during that week had been glorious with June sunshine, and throughout the livelong day the trio were out of doors, roaming all over the country-side—Ella with as keen an enthusiasm over the humble wild flowers growing in hedge and meadow, as over each new discovery of the beautiful in her ever-changing pictures of land and sea ; while the boys were no less eager in their search for breakneck trees and rocks to climb, or streams favourable for their new and as yet fascinating pursuit of trout-fishing.

In the evenings the brothers as a rule divided the charms of their society between the drawing-room and the private sanctum of Mr. Johnstone, the butler, where by that goodnatured functionary they were being instructed in the mysteries of fishing-tackle and the baiting of hooks. Isobel never joined the boys on these occasions. She was always to be found after dinner in the housekeeper's room, listening to

the old lady's stories of bygone days at Manor Coombe, and interested more especially in reminiscences of the times when Mrs. Elphinstone, Ella's mother, was a girl and used to come to spend the merry Christmas season with her cousins at the Manor. Sometimes the old housekeeper would say with kindly wonder, 'But, my dear, why do you not go down to the drawing-room with the young gentlemen of an evening? Not but that I like to have your bright young face beside me, honey, but it is not right that you should not be among the rest. Whatever will the master think?'

But Ella's only answer would be a shake of her head, or a gentle 'I like best being up here with you, Mrs. Forrtreaves.' The housekeeper was puzzled; but once, when the girl added to her usual formula, 'It is so kind of you to let me stay with you!' her eyes filled with tears, and she laid her wrinkled hand on the girl's dark hair, stroking it gently, but not uttering her thought aloud: 'Poor lamb! Is that the secret? Is her home now with them that lets her see she is not wanted? I could well believe it, now I've seen these two proud dames, her cousins. But what would the doctor think if he but knew it? Poor lamb!'

Strange to say, Dr. Wilmott was becoming Ella's greatest interest at Manor Coombe. It is true she was half afraid of him. His abrupt, often ironical fashion of speaking, the sharp searching glances of his keen eyes, the half contemptuous way he had of turning the conversation when it touched upon

anything sacred, seemed to confirm what her aunt Florence had said regarding his eccentricities. According to her wont with strangers, she shrank timidly from his notice; even at table, when suddenly disconcerted by an unexpected word or look, she would become confused and silent, or, if forced to reply, would do so with an amount of shy reserve which, to say the least of it, was not encouraging to her host. And yet the touch of awe with which she regarded the master of the Manor was very different from the nervous tremor she always experienced when in the presence of her aunt Florence. Mingled with the slight fear with which the doctor inspired her was a curious sense of attraction, a feeling of trust that at times almost amounted to liking.

'A jolly place!' Charlie had said. Ah, yes; but-- As the words came back to her, she let her head fall on her hand with a sigh, and the old look of sadness returned into her eyes, while she thought that soon, all too soon, would come the time when she would have to leave all this and return to dreary London. But with that thought came another--the thought of God, the loving Father who had promised to be her never-failing Friend and Comforter--and it was with a little self-reproach that she remembered how faithfully He had always kept His promise, and how wonderfully He had made up to her in sad and lonely times for the love she failed to get from others. 'I hope,' she murmured to herself, 'I hope I shall not love God less at beautiful Manor Coombe than in dreary Cavendish Square.' Here her thoughts were

interrupted by the sound of the boys racing back from the strawberry beds, and with a pang of remorse she realized that she had forgotten all about the day's plans which she had undertaken to think out.

'Ella, Ella, for your life tear along to meet me!' shouted Charlie from the further extremity of the path. 'I set out with my two hands full of strawberries for you, but they're disappearing like magic. I think I must be eating them, and really I'd rather you did; so skurry, and you'll be in time yet.'

Isobel skurried. But it was her brains still more than her feet just then that had the most violent exercise. She was a quick-witted little person in some ways; and by the time she had met her cousin, and eaten the remainder of the spoil intended for her, her ideas had taken shape.

'What would you fellows think of our setting off by ourselves for the Valley of Rocks? We have never walked so far as that before, of course, but that would only make it the more splendid. You know Cousin Frances and Dr. Wilmott are arranging for a huge picnic there next week. But 'it would be much better fun for us to explore first by ourselves, wouldn't it? We could climb the great Castle Rock, and watch the steamers go by, and perhaps we might meet old Mother Meldrum, the witch, who lives in a secret cavern under the Devil's Cheese Ring. I've read about her in a book, and Mrs. Forrtreaves has told me more. It's three or five miles off, I do believe, and we couldn't get back for lunch; but perhaps Mrs. Forrtreaves would give us some biscuits

and milk, and so we should escape the horrid big luncheon party there is going to be here to-day.'

The boys threw their caps in the air with a cheer of delight. 'Off with you to old Dame Forty Thieves,' cried Charlie; adding, as he saw that Ella hesitated, glancing doubtfully from him to Lance, 'Oh, I promise not to pound him until you come back, if he'll promise to keep a civil tongue in his head, or else take himself off to the back of beyond.'

Lance chose the latter, as being the easier alternative, having no mind to promise what was not within the bounds of reason to perform. 'A fellow would be left to himself, if he thought he could keep himself cool cheek by jowl with a pepper-box,' he remarked, with a defiant grimace at Charlie, then strolled off in the direction of the tennis-ground, where he passed ten minutes very agreeably, watching a spirited game between his sisters and some of the younger guests at the Manor. Presently, bethinking himself of Ella and the biscuits, he turned away, muttering, 'Cinder Ella and old Forty Thieves must have arranged about Mother Meldrum by now.'

'Lance,' called out Frances, as he was running off, 'remember there is a luncheon party to-day. See that Charlie and you are punctual and tidy.'

'Thanks,' was the cool rejoinder shouted by the rapidly retreating figure in knickerbockers, 'but we are all three of us off for Lynmouth to catch the first steamer for Bristol. And you may as well lay in a stock of black-edged paper, for, as likely as not, we shall be all drowned long before we get home.'

‘Lance, come back and listen, you naughty boy!’ called Frances, her clear voice reaching him distinctly across the ever-increasing space he was putting between them. ‘You are to tell Charlie that Uncle Vincent will be very angry’ if you do not both appear at lunch. Do you hear?’

Lance was out of sight. He had heard, but, as he did not intend to heed, he carefully refrained from mentioning to his brother and cousin the little conversation which had passed between him and Frances.

As he neared the garden, Isobel appeared hurrying from the house with what seemed a famine supply of biscuits, if the two baskets that hung on her arms were filled with that substantial article of food. But, as soon as she came within hail of the boys, she breathlessly explained that the baskets contained all sorts of good things that Mrs. Forrtreaves had packed up for their expedition. So absorbed had the old lady been in the liberal stuffing of the hampers, that she had only half listened to Ella’s eager detailing of the day’s plan. Had the good housekeeper realized that the children had in contemplation the Valley of Rocks as their goal, she would hardly have allowed the city trio to set forth alone upon an expedition which might prove a somewhat dangerous one to them, by reason of their ignorance and inexperience.

In high glee the three set off. They were good walkers, but at first their progress was slow enough, for the novelties and distractions of the way were many. Now it was the muffled whistle of a Welsh steamer which drew them to the edge of the cliffs,

whence they tried to believe they could see, in spite of the intervening distance, the passengers taken off and boarded by the fishermen in their little boats. Now it was the horn of the stage-coach which made them hurriedly drop the baskets and climb to the top of a hill, from whence they could watch the scarlet-coated driver whipping up his four-in-hand as he passed by some sleepy hamlet. Now—and this last was the most exciting of all—it was the baying of the hounds and the galloping of horses which proclaimed the near neighbourhood of the hunt; and from their point of vantage on the high ground the children could easily distinguish the dogs and mounted cavalcade sweeping madly along in wild pursuit of their prey.

At length they came in sight of the picturesque gables of Ley Abbey, on the other side of which lay the Valley of Rocks. Charlie and Ella were for pressing on, but Lance grew suddenly intractable, declaring he could and would go no further until they had lunch No. 1. Accordingly, in a thickly wooded ravine, through which a tiny stream rippled contentedly as it pushed its way to the open sea some few hundred yards below, the baskets were opened, and Mrs. Forrtreaves' good things attacked with great appreciation.

In process of time the sweet course was reached; and Lance, hard at work upon fruit tartlets and Devonshire cream, found his mighty hunger so far appeased as to admit of his having a little leisure for observation and conversation.

'Cinder, look at these queer branches,' he said, pointing with his fork to two fine trees, an oak and an ash, whose intertwining branches formed a wild but graceful arch over the brawling brook. 'Were they born plaited together in that rum fashion?'

Lancelot had, or thought he had, a great contempt for his cousin, as a girl and a pauper, this latter being the name by which, in his spiteful moods, he elected to call her when Charlie was not by. Nevertheless he never failed to apply to her, in a spirit of confident expectation, whenever he had questions to be answered or problems to be solved. Isobel was gifted with powers of imagination and description which many a time had stood her in good stead, when she and the boys had been left to their own unaided resources. The young gentlemen, it is true, seldom or never were demonstrative in their expressions of gratitude, when with her romancing she had whiled away a tedious hour. But with Charlie at least the gratitude was none the less real if expressed in deeds rather than in words, while in the mind of Lance there was being slowly implanted a firm, if grudging, belief in this female pauper as a kind of walking encyclopedia of useful information.

Suspending operations on her own jam puff, Ella glanced in the direction of the picture indicated by Lance's outstretched fork. 'Born like that?' she repeated in her dreamy story-telling voice. 'Oh no. I can tell you how it all happened. One day, ever so many years ago, when the trees were young, the wind, a rough north-easter, rushed across the sea, and

gave the baby ash a blow in the face. The oak, very indignant, stretched out her hand across the brook, and whispered to the ash, "Don't weep, little ash. Come closer to me, and let me kiss the place and make it well." So the two clasped hands, and became friends. And they liked each other so well, that ever after they kept twining their arms so close round each other that both in one they became too strong for the cruel wind to hurt.'

'One of your bosh and nonsense make-ups,' was Lancelot's ungracious response. 'I know when your stories are fibs; they have no moral.'

'Ho! the moral is as plain as pike-staff,' retorted Charlie. 'It's this. Some fine day when you want to pitch into Ella, you'll find two stronger arms plaited into hers; and when you go at her, you'll get such a bump that you'll fly into seventy bits, like blown-up dynamite. Now then, master, you've had three tartlets. You shan't have another, or else there won't be enough left for lunch No. 2. Let us pack up and go on now.'

Half an hour's brisk walking, and they found themselves at their destination, the far-famed Valley of Rocks. For a minute or two the children stood spell-bound, gazing in wonder at the scene before them, which after all had come upon them quite by surprise. They had been so absorbed during the last quarter of an hour in half-admiring, half-fearful contemplation of the herd of splendid brown horned cattle grazing on the breezy uplands adjoining Ley Abbey, that they had forgotten for the time being to watch for the

valley, until, on emerging from the gates of the Abbey Park, they unexpectedly found themselves on the brow of a steep incline, with rockland spread out at their feet. Far below stretched a long, narrow defile, completely hemmed in on the right by green sloping heights, and on the left, the scaboard side, by huge ramparts of giant rocks, some towering proudly aloft in castellated majesty, while others, grouped together in ponderous masses, lay strewn upon the ground in the wildest confusion, pile upon pile, the wreck apparently of some mighty convulsion of nature in ages bygone.

‘My eye! What a jolly strammash of stones!’ ejaculated Lance, after a minute’s open-mouthed survey of the battlements, which for centuries storm-tossed seas had worn themselves out in fruitless attempts to undermine or overthrow. ‘It’s like after a battle of big boulders.’

‘In a book I read it is called the Little Titans’ Playground. That’s a better name,’ said Isobel, whose cheeks were glowing and her eyes sparkling with enthusiastic delight at the vision spread out before them. ‘Oh, let us go down quick and get nearer!’ she cried excitedly.

‘Who were the Titans?’ asked Charlie, as they rushed down the incline. But before Ella could get her breath to reply, the boys had caught sight of the steep path, showing like a thread as it wound round and round to the summit of the great Castle Rock, close to which our trio found themselves at the end of their rapid descent.

‘Ho! let us climb that huge turreted fellow yonder. From his top we’ll see the whole of creation.’

‘But, Charlie,’ gasped Isobel, shrinking back, ‘is it safe? Oh, it isn’t; we might miss our footing, and the wind would blow us right over into the sea on the other side!’

‘Stuff! There, Lance, hold on to her behind. I’ll clutch her in front.’

Unable to resist, Ella was dragged and pushed up the dizzy path, and at the top unceremoniously plumped down on a flat ledge, and told by Lance to stop chattering her teeth, if she didn’t want the seagulls to think her the missing link.

‘Never mind about her teeth, you ass; it’s her eyes she wants now,’ interrupted Charlie. ‘Hip, hip, hurrah! Isn’t this the jolliest view? Hip! hip!’

And Isobel, holding on as if for dear life to the very substantial bulwark of rock against which she leant, raised her frightened eyes, and at once all sense of fear was lost at the sight which burst upon her view.

Far below stretched the sweep of the mighty sea; surging fruitlessly against the impenetrable barriers of rock, which, as if with a proud consciousness of strength, were ranged in defence of the coast as far as the eye could see. Now they were drawn up in serried ranks of unbroken wall; now, recoiling as if for onslaught, they made a bold dash seaward; and now, as suddenly receding again, formed themselves once more into solid lines, the one moment seeming to frown defiance at the sullen passion of the swelling sea, the next gazing with the majesty of silent scorn

at the tiny waves, with their sunlit spray frolicking in harmless sport among the white coves that nestled under the headlands. Beyond, to the left, sloped the richly wooded uplands and the fertile valleys, self-conscious under the steady gaze of the sun, and half coyly trying to hide their blushes among the deep shadows of the hills and pine-woods. One little quick breath, and Isobel sat silent and motionless, her eyes fixed spellbound.

Lancelot was not easily fascinated into silence. 'Who were the Titans, did you say, Cinder? Giants, I suppose,' he went on, as he got no answer.—'I say, Char, wouldn't it be fun if we were Titans, and could play football all day with these galumptious rocks for balls?'

'I'm not so sure,' was the dubious answer. 'You see, though you were a Titan, you would be my brother all the same.'

'Well,' responded Lance, ignoring this unbrotherly slight, 'I must say it's a fine higgledy-piggledy these young Titans have made down here. Are they not thinking of coming back some day to their old playground to tidy up?'

Still no reply from Ella. She had rested her elbow on the ledge, and, with her head on her hand, was gazing as if blind to all save the grand beauty of which it seemed her eyes could never take their fill, and deaf to all sounds save the hushed lullaby of the waves rocking to and fro in their ocean bed.

'What in all the world can she be staring at?' contemptuously muttered Lance, who was already restless

under the intolerable monotony of their present situation. 'And why need she take forty times longer than other people to stare, I'd like to know? Why, in less than half a jiffy I took in everything there was to take in—five long jut-outs, and fifteen little ones, and ten coves, and three steamers. Is she going to sit glaring out there for ever and ever?'

'No; and it's because she can't, she's doing it now. She remembers, I suppose, what you've forgotten, if you ever knew it at all, that one day the world and everything down here is going to be burnt up, and then there's to be no more sea. And so she's taking her fill of it now while she has the chance.'

CHAPTER III

A SUPPER PARTY

BUT even Charlie, with a deeper insight than his brother into revelation, got tired at last of standing on a pinnacle of the Castle Rock, watching for steamers and seagulls, and speculating upon the ancient smugglers' adventures in the black-mouthed caves which Lance and he could trace along the base of the cliffs. 'Cinder, I say, has Mother Meldrum bewitched you?' he demanded, giving his cousin a little shake. 'Come, and let us go and call upon her in her cavern,' he went on, trying to divert her attention.

Isobel roused herself, then slowly got to her feet. With one hand clinging to the rock, her hair tossed about by the wind, which had brought a bright colour to her cheeks, she looked like the distressed princess of the fortress about to be rescued by her knights. One long last look she took, then turned, and reluctantly followed the boys, who led the way down the steep narrow path which wound round and round the rock, until it landed them upon the green plateau at

its base. Crossing the narrow valley, they made their way to the top-heavy erection standing in lonely rigidity like the ruins of an ancient keep, which went by the name of the Devil's Cheese Ring. But, to the boys' chagrin, a hot tiring scramble resulted in their failure to discover any trace either of the witch or of her grotto.

'What a sell!' cried Charlie, taking off his cap, and wiping his brow. He was heated with the double exertion of bringing himself and Ella up the rough sun-exposed path. 'And now I cannot find Mother Meldrum to ask her why the world in North Devon is all ups and downs like a crumpled sheet of green and brown paper.'

'I can tell you that as well as Mother Meldrum,' said Isobel, with a wise nod, as she seated herself gingerly upon the edge of a boulder that had the appearance of needing but a touch to tip it over the incline. 'It was ever so long ago, when the world was flat, except at one place in the middle, where the mountains all stood close together in one big mass. They held a parliament one hot day in midsummer. They were squashed, they said, and so warm they could not breathe, and it made them cross, and spit fire in each other's faces. So they resolved to jump right away from each other, and make great holes in themselves, some deep and some shallow, for the winds to play hide-and-seek among, and for them to look through and see the fun. And so it is that, when the winds are tired of playing at ninepins in the woods, they have a game of hide-and-seek among these hidey-

holes, the crumpled places, you know, which they called valleys. The first day the fun began the mountains laughed till the tears ran down their cheeks, and ever since their tears have kept on trickling in laughing, dancing brooks, singing on their way to the great sea.'

'Great bosh!' interjected Lancelot scornfully. He had stood on one foot to listen, and was sorry he had betrayed so unmanly an interest in fairy-tale nonsense. 'What o'clock do you suppose it is? We have had one lunch and a half, but I am fearfully hungry again. I believe it's tea-time.'

Ella uttered an exclamation of consternation. 'Oh, Charlie, do you think it really can be so late? And we have all that long way to walk back! Will Dr. Wilmott be displeased if we are not home by tea-time?'

'Pooh! we don't need to care for that old bear,' said Lance, with lofty indifference. 'We can easily jink him, and shut ourselves up in the jam pantry.'

'I dare say Uncle Vincent and all the rest will manage to drink their tea, if it isn't too hot, although we're not there,' returned Charlie also indifferently, for he was absorbed in the contemplation of a silver watch he had pulled out of his pocket. He put it to his ear, then gave it a sounding thump on his knee. 'He's going now!' he cried triumphantly. 'But who knows how long the duffer has been standing still to watch us jumping? Lance, you old thick-skull, why don't you give me a clap for that pun? It's a good one, for I didn't see it myself till after it was made.'

Lance gave the clap with such exceeding cordiality on Charlie's back that the latter felt prompt resentment, and would have retaliated, but that Ella's face of uneasiness diverted his attention. 'What's the row, Cinder?' he demanded.

'It isn't exactly that I am afraid of Dr. Wilmott,' she said, 'but I don't like to do what may seem rude. And indeed, Lance, Dr. Wilmott is so kind to us, I don't think you should call him an old bear.'

'Don't you set yourself up as if you knew better than your betters. Mother said we'd just as well keep out of Uncle Vincent's way; and what does that mean, I'd like to know, but that he's third cousin to a wild beast?'

The way back seemed long and tiring, for they could not afford time to stop for rests, and the sun was still hot when they were in the parts unsheltered by friendly woods and cliffs. It was a nearly two hours' march, and Ella's spirits, along with her strength, had begun to flag a little by the time they reached the boundaries of Manor Coombe, and found themselves stealing cautiously through meadow-paths to the kitchen gardens, whence they hoped to make their way unobserved through the shrubberies by a back entrance into the house. But in the stable-court they encountered the squire, accompanied by his dogs. His face, which wore an ominous frown, cleared somewhat at the sight of the children.

'Ha! there you are at last! Just barely in time to save us from a scare, you worthless scamps!' he exclaimed, shaking his whip threateningly at the

boys. 'And now,' he went on, trying to lash himself up into the semblance of a fury, 'perhaps you will condescend to explain what you meant by stealing off like this to nobody knew where, and for nobody knew how long, in defiance of authority? Perhaps your high-minded intention was to show your supreme indifference to my wishes, eh?'

The boys, not seeing the twinkle in the doctor's eyes, half concealed by the bushy grey eyebrows, tossed their heads high, to conceal their secret trepidation. As for Isobel, at the first stern word of the doctor's, she shrank behind Charlie, looking for all the world, as Lance told her afterwards, like a burst balloon.

'I thought you told us this was Liberty Hall,' muttered Charlie, in sullen reply to his uncle's tirade.

Equally incensed, Lance descended as usual to flippancy. 'Next time we want to take a walk must we ask our nursemaid, when we find her, if we may?'

The look which the master of Mandr Coombe bestowed upon the last speaker had the effect of cowing that young gentleman's spirit to the verge of annihilation. 'Liberty Hall is not an asylum for unbridled tongues, remember that, sir. For the rest, when I gave you youngsters the run of the place, I imagined I was dealing with young gentlemen, who would be too honourable to take advantage of their liberty.'

But at this Ella, emerging from the background,

spoke up timidly. 'Please, Dr. Wilmott, it is altogether my fault if we have done wrong, for it was my plan to go to the Valley of Rocks, and it was I who proposed that we should ask Mrs. Forrtreaves for biscuits, so that we need not come home for lunch. And Mrs. Forrtreaves was so kind, and packed our baskets full of nice things. And—and—oh, it was so, so beautiful in the valley by the sea, and we didn't know how late it was, and——'

'Stop, stop!' cried the bewildered squire, seizing her trembling hand in a kindly grip. 'This is an altogether different version of the black tale of insubordination which was given to me. You three set off, I was told, in bold defiance of commands, and yet here is that worthy Mrs. Forrtreaves said to be in the conspiracy? Now, I specially wanted you three to help me at luncheon to-day. My principal guest has a mania for scapegrace youngsters, and you were the only entertainment I had provided for him. Frances assured me that she had told you all this, but that, in spite of her, you two fellows, led by Miss Elphinstone, had" deliberately taken yourselves off for the day, and I and my chief guest were left in the lurch.'

Isobel's and Charlie's bewildered faces told very plainly that all this was news to them. As for Lancelot, with the strict reticence habitual to him on occasions like the present, he refrained from mentioning the episode of the morning, which might have thrown some light upon the subject.

'Well, well,' said the squire, looking from one to

the other, and gently patting Ella's hand, which he still held, 'it is plain there has been a mistake somewhere. We've been playing a game of cross questions, you and I, and little wonder if we've had some crooked answers. Now then, we'll start afresh. Ay, and so you've had a day of it by yourselves, coquetting with Mother Meldrum in the Titans' Playground, and come home with whole bones, I declare!' He was leading the way to the front of the house now, and the children, completely reassured by his manner and the merry twinkle in his eyes, forgot to be afraid of him. 'I declare, if Mrs. Forrtreaves had taken in where you were going, her hair would have been lifting up her best cap by now. Next time, however, that you plan a jaunt to call on Mother Meldrum, you had better invite me to accompany you. I promise not to spoil the fun. Ay, ay, you elf, and so you thought it beautiful, did you? And you had a good time, all three of you, eh?'

Simultaneously the boys shouted, 'Splendiferous!' 'Jolly!' But it was the shining of Isobel's eyes, and the bright colour that overspread her sly little face, that attracted the doctor's notice.

'I never thought,' she whispered softly, as if to herself, 'I never thought there could have been a place so beautiful except in heaven.'

At the last word the master of Manor Coombe slightly shrugged his shoulders. The gesture might have implied surprise or contempt, or both. But he took a second look at the quiet speaker. 'Strange!' he muttered to himself. 'Whatever did Frances mean

by telling me she was an unintelligent, uninteresting, and altogether disagreeable little piece? If I am not mistaken, now that I see her eyes with their veil of shyness thrown back for a moment, I read a very different tale.'

'Is it not nearly dinner-time, or tea-time, or something, Uncle Vincent? We haven't had any grub worth speaking of since the time of the Middle Ages,' suddenly burst out Lance, upon whom bodily wants began to press, now that mental anxiety was removed.

'Luncheon and tea are both over. Supper is the next meal on the programme for you,' solemnly rejoined his uncle. 'But I have no objection to your having a nondescript feed instantan, provided that that nursemaid of yours, Lancelot, does not forbid the irregularity.'

The boy coloured, and his uncle, thinking his pertness sufficiently punished, allowed the subject of the nursery maid to drop.

On entering the house the party were met by Frances. 'Ah, here come the runaways at last!' she exclaimed; then, turning to her little cousin, her tone grew cold. 'I am sorry, Ella, that you should have abused my uncle's kindness with your old habit of disobediently leading the boys into mischief.'

Isobel, chilled by the sharp rebuke, and convinced that now Dr. Wilmott must think the very worst of her, would have shrunk away with that crushed look on her face which her aunt Florence called sullen, but her hand was held fast; and although her eyes, which were downcast, did not see the flash of anger in

the doctor's, she was somewhat reassured by the way in which he drew her close to him.

All Frances' coldness was gone as she turned again to her uncle. Her manner was graciousness itself, her voice gay and coaxing. 'Uncle Vincent, Captain Travers and I have been hard at work practising that duet which you asked us to sing. We spent the whole of the lovely afternoon indoors getting it up, and now we are impatient to gratify you by our performance.'

'Thank you, but I have a supper party on hand at present. When I have attended to my guests I shall give myself the pleasure, Miss Wilmott, of accepting your very kind invitation.'

The reply and the accompanying low bow were elaborately courteous; nevertheless, it was with an uncomfortable sense of having been snubbed that Frances betook herself to the drawing-room, where she privately confided to her sister that Uncle Vincent was in one of the worst of his incomprehensible moods, utterly unapproachable, in fact.

Beatrice, looking the picture of elegance in her white muslin and lace, looked up with easy unconcern from the low chair where she was being half lulled to sleep by the soothing harmonics of the sonata Captain Travers was playing. 'I am sure Uncle Vincent's peculiarities are not worth your taking the trouble to pucker up your brows like that, Fan. It is not becoming, I assure you.'

Frances turned away impatiently. 'I shouldn't wonder,' she soliloquized, 'if in the end Uncle Vincent

will choose her for the sake of her insipid doll's face, while I— Well, I take endless pains to ingratiate myself with him, but—bah! I declare it's like paying court to a tame bear. The creature may have his playful moods, but nine times out of ten one is disagreeably reminded there is still the bear in him.'

Meanwhile the said bear was making himself very tame indeed in the dining-room with his three guests. Like a big schoolboy enjoying a lark, he led the party from sideboard to pantry, where a serious raid was made on the finest eatables they could find, the doctor compelling Ella to bear away a startling supply of indigestible sugared fruits as her share of the booty. The butler, attracted by the unwonted sounds, and fearful of burglars, crept softly to the back of the dining-room door, and peeped through the keyhole. A broad grin overspread his honest face, as he took note of the singular display of good things piled up promiscuously at one end of the long table, and heard the master of the house remark, as he cut deep into a chicken pie, 'Helping ourselves is better, and far greater fun besides, than disturbing the party in the servants' hall to wait upon us.' The guests were quite of the opinion of their host, and the meal, enlivened by the jokes and stories of the squire, who seemed to be laying himself out for the entertainment of the company, proved an exceedingly merry one.

The young people had completely forgotten their dread of the eccentric master of Manor Coombe, and were their natural selves with him. Even Lance had

laid aside for the time being his firmly established theory with regard to the ogre of the Manor. While shy Isobel, cheered and brightened by the doctor's kindness, opened out like a sensitive flower unfolding its delicate petals in the sunshine. She met Dr. Wilmott's kind, but curiously abrupt, advances with a shy responsiveness, and at times there came a look of surprise and gratitude in her wistful eyes that made him suddenly clear his throat as if from some unwonted obstruction.

At the end of a short happy hour the host started to his feet. 'This is cosier by a long way than the drawing-room,' he remarked, with a comical shrug of his shoulders. 'But I suppose I must be off. You see, there is that terrible duct awaiting me, and I've got to make up all sorts of complimentary humbugs about it, and——'

'If you please, sir,' said the butler, inserting his portly person into the room, 'a lad from Porter's farm has come over to see if you would be so good as to come. The old lady has taken a fit, and Dr. Marshall is not at home, and——'

'What business has the old lady to take anything so unwholesome, not to say inconvenient?' growled the doctor. 'All right, Johnstone. Order the dog-cart, and tell the farm fellow to wait and ride back. Bring me my overcoat. Hollo! where are my driving-gloves? Ah! here they are! Now then, just see these ventilators!' he growled again, as he grimly surveyed the startling rents in the said gloves, which he had found after a plunge into one of his coat

pockets. 'Didn't Mrs. Forrtreaves assure me that she had it laid on her heart to mend a few of these yawning chasms for me? 'And she hasn't done it, the perfidious villain! Ah, well, poor old soul, after all it's her memory that has the worst holes.'

Another moment, and he was gone, so absorbed by the consideration of the unwholesomeness of old Mrs. Porter's attack that he forgot even to bid good-night to the children, who watched his departure from the hall-door with regretful eyes.

'What's the fun of that old woman dragging off the squire to-night just to look at her old tongue?' grumbled Lance. 'There's the parish doctor; can't he do as much as that for his living? Ho! here comes Mother Forty Thieves!' he exclaimed, descriing the figure of the housekeeper, whose rheumatic instincts had announced to her the fact that the hall-door, which at this hour should be closed, stood wide open. 'You're out of breath, old mother,' said Lance, shutting the door with a resounding bang, and unceremoniously dragging Mrs. Forrtreaves by the skirt of her afternoon black silk gown to one of the carved hall seats. 'We want to know why the squire of Manor Coombe has to go bothering round physicking all the unhealthy humbugs in the countryside, when they've got a doctor of their own, paid by the parish to poison them, free, gratis, and for nothing?'

'Is it Dr. Marshall that you mean, Master Lance-lot? Ah! he is a nice young fellow. It was the master hisself as got him this berth round here, and Dr. Robert he would just do anything for the squire,

‘who’s been the making of him, and so would the poor dear widow lady, his mother, that she would. And the master, he’ll go and see the sick folk for Dr. Robert when he’s out of the way, or the case be a bad one; and well the young man knows, and the folk too, that a visit from the squire of Manor Coombe is more worth than if they’d had down the grandest man from London town. Why does he do it, do you ask, Master Lancelot? Because—because, our Master Vincent, he’s the cleverest and the kindest, and the best—’ but here the honest housekeeper broke off with a sigh in the middle of her enthusiastic outburst. What was she thinking of, as she leant her elbow on the arm of the seat, and shaded her eyes with her hand? Was she thinking of the one thing lacking in her beloved master, the one thing without which all else, fair though it might be, promised so little, either for the life that now is or for that which is to come?

‘Well, I suppose he isn’t an ogre after all,’ moralized Lance. ‘What a scrumptious supper he gave us! I declare I don’t care how often we set off to the Valley of Rocks, if this is always to be the end of the programme. I wonder now which of the girls he’ll choose to stay with him? I shouldn’t mind stepping into her shoes myself, even if that meant my finding out, without becoming a Chinese female, what it is to have your ten live toes pinched to death.’

‘He’s a brick!’ emphatically put in Charlie. ‘And if that’s what it is to be peculiar, then I’ve a notion to cultivate peculiarities myself.’

Isobel said not a word ; but, judging by her shining eyes, there was much she could have said, if she had known how.

The next day she was shut up in her room for a long while, hard at work pricking her fingers over a bit of rather stiff sewing. And the next time the doctor wanted his thick driving gloves, he found the holes, great and small, neatly mended. He looked closely at the stitches, which had been put in with as much painstaking care and considerably more regularity than Mrs. Forrtreaves' handiwork nowadays could show.

'Are you fond of mending gloves, Frances?' he asked, walking into the morning-room and accosting his niece, who was arranging flowers with much taste at the table.

'I mend my own, Uncle Vincent. And if you will allow me to have the pleasure of mending yours, I shall be only too happy,' she replied. But she did not look delighted as she glanced furtively at the pair of leather-like articles in her uncle's hands.

'Thank you, my dear, but I am very well off just now in the mending line. The fairies, it would appear, see to my needs. Miss Elfinette,' turning suddenly to Isobel, whose head had been bent low over her book during the above conversation ; 'Miss Elfinette, do you believe in fairies?'

The dark head was bent still lower over the open page, and one hand was put up to hide the blushing cheeks. But the doctor got no reply to his question.

Frances shrugged her shoulders. 'I cannot imagine,

'Ella, what my uncle must think of your ill-bred ways,' she said, sharply.

The doctor stepped across the room. 'Child elf,' he said, patting her flushed cheek, 'my thoughts are not very terrific. A wizard' thinks he has found out an elf's secret, that is all.'

CHAPTER IV

SUNDAY AT MANOR COOMBE

THE party at the Manor were still lingering round the table one Sunday morning after breakfast, which had been rather later than usual that day. At the bottom of the table the master of the house was studying the weekly sailing list of the steamers.

‘This would be a magnificent day for a sail,’ he remarked, laying down his time-table, and addressing the company in general. ‘Shall we make up a party for an excursion on the water?’ There was a hesitating murmur of assent from one or two of the guests, but the greater number maintained an awkward silence. ‘Ah!’ exclaimed their host with a sudden recollection, ‘I had forgotten this was Sunday. That knocks my fine plan on the head, for I presume none of you care to keep me company in my unfashionable custom of not going to church.’ There was just the faintest perceptible sneer in his tone.

From her seat at the head of the table, Frances answered in her smooth voice, ‘Indeed, Uncle Vincent,

'It is only too kind of you to plan a delightful excursion for us. I for one should be charmed to avail myself of the tempting offer——'

Abruptly, and with a slight frown on his brow, her uncle interrupted her. 'May I ask what is the custom in your mother's house with regard to church attendance on Sundays?' he asked.

Frances coloured with vexation. She was beginning to despair of ever succeeding in conciliating this strange uncle of hers. 'Oh, of course we go to church,' she answered, half pettishly. 'Mother likes her household to do so, because, as you say, it is the conventional thing. But I had imagined that at Manor Coombe such rules of fashion need not be so very rigidly observed.'

'In my young days,' duly responded her uncle, 'it was the fashion for children to respect the wishes of their parents. As I told you, I am old-fashioned, accordingly, I still think that the fifth commandment custom is a good one. Ladies and gentlemen,' he continued, raising his voice above the murmur of talk around the table, 'in less than half an hour the carriage and brake will be at the door to drive those who wish to go to church.' So saying, with a courteous bow to his guests, he left the room.

Shortly after Isobel betook herself to a little wooded dell below the kitchen gardens, where she established herself in a shady nook among the ferns, in the hope of having a quiet half-hour's study with her Bible Searching Almanack, according to an old Sunday custom she had faithfully kept up since her mother's

death. But, alas! her retreat was known to the boys, and in a few minutes it was invaded.

'We've just managed, and no more, to dodge Uncle Vincent,' chuckled Lanec, as he executed a delighted caper. 'He is prancing about the garden, looking for us, I suppose, to lock us up with the fifth commandment till it is time to go to church.'

'I wish he would look for me,' sighed Ella. 'I suppose the carriages will be quite full without me, though. And at any rate Cousin Frances would likely be angry if I were to ask to be allowed to ride. I wonder if it is too far to walk? Last Sunday Mrs. Forrtreaves would not hear of my going to church, because I had a headache. But to-day I am quite well. Charlie, do you think Dr. Wilmott would be displeased if I went alone?'

There was the sound of an approaching footstep. Like a flash the boys disappeared from view.

'What is Dr. Wilmott to be displeased about?' asked the master of Manor Coombe, emerging from a plantation of young trees behind the glen. There was an unmistakable cloud on the speaker's brow. Ella could not read its meaning, and for a moment feared her words had been the unintentional cause.

'Please, Dr. Wilmott, have I vexed you? I did not mean to,' she ventured timidly.

'Vexed me? Of course you have,' he said, with mock fierceness; 'I am very angry with you for calling me names. In future, if I ever hear you call me anything but Uncle Vincent, I shall indeed be seriously displeased. I was always "Uncle Vincent" to

your mother, Elfinette. She never thought of walking on stilts with her old uncle, and why should you, eh?' Ella's face cleared. The brightness that came into her eyes, and her low pleased laugh, told the doctor that he was not likely to have cause for anger again on the score of his name. 'And now,' he went on, seating himself lazily on the soft bank, 'tell me what you were plotting to do just now that was to incur my just wrath.'

'Only to walk to church, Uncle Vincent'

The squire bent his keen eyes on the child. 'Do you want to go?'

She bowed her head in assent. After a moment's hesitation, she added in a voice that trembled a little, 'Mother and I always went to church together, until—until she wasn't able. When she was ill I went alone.'

'I see,' returned the other with deep sympathy, the half satirical expression leaving his face. He said nothing more, and Isobel went on more shyly, her quick childish instinct telling her vaguely that here she might not be understood. 'It is not only because dear mother would have wished it. I like going to church for its own sake.'

'You like going to church,' repeated Dr. Wilmott slowly, his glance falling for the first time on the book which lay in her lap. His tone grew slightly satirical again. 'You mean that you have been taught that such is the correct thing to say, and, like an obedient child, you say it without stopping to think that you do not in the least mean it.' There

was no reply to this. But the doctor was quick to see the grieved almost hurt look that had crept into his companion's face. He continued more gently. 'To many grown-up people the long church service is an utter weariness, how much more must it be that to children? The boys do not like going to church, I am sure, then why should you?'

But at this a glad light came into Ella's eyes. 'Sometimes, when the service is very long, and the sermon dry, I do get very wearied. But parts of it are always nice, the hymns and all that, you know. But I like it because it is God's own house, and I belong to God, and He speaks to me there Himself'

They were both silent for a minute or two, Ella fearful lest she had said too much, the doctor pondering the strange answer he had got to his question. Suddenly some strong impulse moved the girl out of her habitual timidity. 'Uncle Vincent,' she said wistfully, laying her hand on his, 'it is so good to belong to Jesus! It makes us happy, even when we have not much else to make us glad.' Then she shrank back, abashed at her own boldness, and utterly startled by the sound of Dr. Wilmott's short unmirthful laugh.

'You would have your old uncle become a Christian, is that it, Elfinette? No, no. Religious people nowadays are humbugs and hypocrites, men who wear a cloak of piety the more easily to deceive the simpletons they hope to dupe. Ha! ha! I am up to their crooked ways! And, whatever Vincent Wilmott may be, he at least is not one of these

'canting sneaks!' He spoke fiercely, and more to himself than to the child, whom for the moment he had forgotten. But as he met the distressed look on the face raised to his, his own relaxed its sternness, and he reassuringly patted the hand he took. 'You need not look so horrified, elf. No doubt there are exceptions to the rule of Christian hypocrites. When I come to think of it, I believe in a few myself. Peter and Paul in the long ago times, ay, and to come nearer home, my mother, and yours, Elfinette, as I knew them in the days that are past and gone.' His face had softened strangely, and there was a sudden break in his voice. But after a moment he recovered himself, and continued, unconsciously speaking, as before, more to himself than to her.

'Well, well, they no doubt, and such as they, are the "elect" of whom your Bible speaks. And there is small chance of Vincent Wilmott attaining to the height of their exalted goodness. Nor do I grudge them their high position. If I believe at all in the God of the Bible, I believe in His right to choose among the truly great, and the truly noble, and the truly wise, the few who are worthy of His favour. But in no sense do I belong to the great ones of the earth. Well, well, be it so. Even if I were to care, which I do not, of course, to aim at the high standard of perfection required of those who enroll themselves as candidates for Jehovah's selection, it is too late. Vincent Wilmott is too old now for the performance of such religious feats. I leave them to more youthful, more hopeful aspirants. But there—whatever

am I thinking of? Talking religious metaphysics to a baby! Forget it all, Elfinette. It is only an old man's wanderings. They need not trouble you.'

Ella did not reply. An expression of mingled perplexity and distress had clouded her brow. For some little time she sat deep in thought, her chin resting on her hand. And as the doctor watched her a doubt crossed his mind. He had been talking religious metaphysics, that was unquestionable; but whether it had been to a baby was less clear. Evidently some thought was at work in her mind. He waited patiently.

'Uncle Vincent,' said the girl at length, speaking with the slow deliberateness of earnest conviction, 'I don't think I understand all you said, and I know I can't explain things, for I am not a bit clever; but I do know that, although I am not great or noble or wise or even good, I belong to God. I must be one of the "elect," for He has chosen me, and yet it could not have been for anything in me, you know, for I am only stupid little Isobel Elphinstone.'

At this moment the boys, whose minds had been set at rest by hearing the sound of wheels driving off down the avenue, came up to hear what on earth the Cinder and the governor could be getting to talk about so long.

Their arrival upon the scene recalled Dr. Wilmott to himself. 'Why,' he exclaimed, consulting his watch, 'I should not wonder if we are too late. I believe the carriages must have already started.' With much alacrity the boys made haste to relieve his

'mind upon that score. He thought for a minute. 'Can you walk three miles on a stretch on a hot day?' he asked, turning to Isobel. Guessing his meaning, she smiled brightly for reply. 'Then to her cousins, 'Boys, do you care for a walk through the meadows and along the cliffs to Lynton?' The two brothers threw their caps in the air. 'I am going to take Ella to church by short cuts' The boys' caps fell with a thud on the turf and lay there, while the faces of their owners lengthened visibly.

'What's the fun of going to church?' Lance muttered moodily. 'We get enough of that in London.'

Charlie, though put out, recovered himself more quickly. Candour forced him to admit that, when the parsons weren't dry as dust, it wasn't so awful as one might think. 'But, you see, Uncle Vincent, our vicar is as old as old can be. If he ever was a boy, it was before the Flood, and he's forgotten. He's only got two stories, and he tells them time about to "the rising generation," that's what he calls Lance and me, I suppose because Lance is everlastingly bobbing up from his seat in the middle of the sermon, to show it's time for fifthly, and lastly, and then home to dinner. The one about Goliath is scrumptious, but we know it by heart before he begins; and the other is a rigmarole all about our being dear little lambs in God's sheep-fold, where, if we are goody-goodies, and obedient, we may stay for ever and ever, Amen, and grow up into—into—oh yes, into trees of righteousness with a thousandfold of apples growing upon every one of our stalks.'

'Such a rot!' interrupted Lance disgustedly. 'We might just as well have stayed sheep and eaten the fallen apples.'

'A most striking sermon, truly, if I am to judge by this outline of its parabolical illustration,' drily remarked Dr. Wilmott. 'But, Elfinette, you had better put on your best gloves. It is high time we were off, if you are to be in time for church.'

Ella glanced down at the carefully mended but considerably worn pair of black kid gloves she was buttoning, and her cheeks crimsoned painfully.

'These are her best,' volunteered Lance. 'Are they not hole-y enough for Sunday?' he slyly asked, taking care to dodge out of Charlie's way, who was threatening to take summary vengeance on him for the vile pun. 'Fan and Bee have swell gloves, the Cinder has to content herself with being a smug.'

There was an ominous flash in the squire's eyes. He said nothing, however; but, possessing himself of one of the shabbily gloved hands, led the way through the plantation skirting the broad meadows of Manor Coombe.

For some distance their way lay by picturesque by-paths bordering richly cultivated fields, or through the heart of moss-carpeted woods, where the boys, to the serious damage of their Sunday boots, more than once managed, to their own delight, to achieve the feat of jumping into, instead of across, the rippling brooks that again and again crossed their path. Occasionally the walkers emerged into the more fre-

frequented country lanes, and through gaps in the tall hedge-rows gay with wild roses and sweet with honey-suckle, glimpses could be had of the sea with the sun shining on its dancing waves

To the surprise of the young people, for they had not recognized their whereabouts, they found themselves at last descending the steep rising ground that crowned the Valley of Rocks, through which the doctor led the way to the North Walk, a dizzy ledge cut out on the face of the cliffs which descended almost in a sheer precipice to the water some four or five hundred feet below. Keeping a sharp eye on the boys, who, with the boastful heedlessness of their kind, would have delighted in displaying to poor frightened Isobel the courage of the superior sex, by walking as near to the edge as might be, Dr Wilmott put Ella on the inner side of the giddy path, and keeping firm grasp of her hand, tried to divert her shrinking yet fascinated eyes from the depths beneath to the view spread out to the left and in front of them

Beyond the quaint, sleepy little fishing village of Lynmouth, whose white cottages soon began to show themselves behind the tiny harbour, stretched far out into the sea the bold promontory called the Foreland. Fringing the massive irregular pile, indented with numerous miniature bays, the white shingle gleamed brightly in the sunlight, in startling contrast to the dark beetling crags frowning grimly overhead; while the sportive waves, as if reluctant to depart with the receding tide, lingered about the

entrances to the caves, effectually barring the way to these haunts of the reckless smugglers of olden times.

'It would be perfectly scrumptious fun to get down there and explore the caves, and make believe we were the smugglers come alive again!' exclaimed Lance, as his uncle concluded a thrilling tale of free-booting adventure.

'It would almost to a certainty be no fun at all,' hastily interrupted the doctor 'The coast is extremely dangerous. No one, unless he knew it well, would be so mad as to risk losing his life on that pebbly beach, safe though it looks from here. Its perils well served the purpose of the old smugglers, however, who carried on their dishonest trade in perfect safety. The story is still told, with a touch of enjoyment by the old men of Lynmouth, how the thieving rascals used cleverly to manage to convey their ill-gotten booty to the upper world. Under cover of the darkness of night, the band used to form themselves into a make-believe funeral cortège. Preceded by a keg of spirits, covered by a black pall, and mounted on the shoulders of six bearers, the whole gang would march in slow measured tread towards the village, where the sudden and noiseless approach of these midnight processions in their weird ghostliness had become a terror so great that none, who had the ill-luck to meet one, dared bar its progress.'

In the interest of the doctor's stories the children did not observe that they were nearing the end of the

now broadened North Walk, and approaching the outskirts of Lynton. Presently, on turning a sharp bend of the road, they found they had left the sea behind them, and at the same moment the sound of a church bell told them they were in the village of Lynton, a fashionable summer resort, made up of a few clustering groups of houses, clinging close together, and perched high up, like eagles' eyries, on bold ridges of rock.

While the boys turned their heads to catch the last glimpse of the panorama of sea, rocks, fishing village, and harbour of Lynmouth encircling the bay beneath them, the doctor said to Ella, who had been unusually quiet throughout the walk, and whose face had clouded over at the sound of the bell, 'Well, Elfinette, have we frightened you with our gruesome tales?' He could not catch the inarticulate murmur which was her only answer to the question that had confused her not a little. For, in truth, she had been so occupied with her own thoughts that she had heard but little of what the doctor had been saying. He tried again. 'You are too tired with the long, hot walk, is that it?' Her quick, 'No, thank you,' was quite decided, but the cloud on her brow did not lighten, and suddenly, taking advantage of the boys pressing forward to ask their uncle a question about the caves, she slipped behind and kept determinedly in the rear.

Presently Lancelot, also falling into the rear, joined himself on to her side. 'I say, Cinder, I'm coming out of church before the Commandments this morning,'

he abruptly informed her. 'They're old-fashioned things, and I'm sick and tired of them, especially the eighth. I've got a frog here,' significantly stroking his pocket. 'I grabbed it in old Jem Davies' garden, so I suppose he'd say it was his. But I don't intend to put it back, so I'll just make that all right by cutting before the Commandments. And you needn't think it's your business either to come sneaking after me, just as if you were a nursery pram tied on to me behind. If you make a mudge, I'll open my pocket, and let the frog jump out upon you, and then, ha! ha! won't there be a jolly game of leap-frog in the pew? Shall I show you how?' He cautiously inserted his hand into his pocket, and lo! it was full of emptiness, so far at least as animal life was concerned. The game of leap-frog had been already played out. 'It doesn't matter,' said Lancelot, with a sniff to cover his chagrin; 'I dare say his brothers and sisters are still keeping house at Jem's. I'll call on them some other day when it's cooler.'

To all this Ella made no response, unless a sign of impatience could be called such. Lance tried once more to stimulate her conversational powers by the mild hint that black cinders like her were hideous to look upon, when they burnt themselves up with a blazing fiery bad temper. Still no reply; and Lance, declaring that she was about as interesting to talk to as a stone image, took himself off, and leisurely followed his uncle and Charlic, who were by this time a little way in advance.

Left alone, Ella's face grew still moodier, while she

lagged slower and slower, her feet seeming to carry her with increasing unwillingness towards the church, whose spire she could now see peeping above the roofs of the houses in the village street. What had happened to cast a dark shadow over the brightness of her spirit, and bring into her face that look, half miserable, half sullen? Lance had told her she was in a bad temper, and Ella, though resenting the blunt accusation, knew in her secret heart that it was true. Poor girl, she was only too conscious that something was wrong within, and she longed, but in vain, to escape from the spirit of angry discontent which had taken complete possession of her. The trouble had begun with her feeling of shame over the shabby gloves about which Dr. Wilmott had remarked, and she had allowed herself to brood over her sense of mortification, until she felt that to go to church so meanly dressed was more than she could bear. A crowd of bitter angry thoughts filled her mind, until there was no longer any room for the quiet gladness of an hour ago. She no longer said brightly to herself that this was God's own day, and that she was going to meet Him, and hear Him speak to her in His own house. Rather she would have felt relieved had something occurred to prevent her entering the church at all. As she again and again glanced from her hands to her well-worn black cashmere frock, the shabbiness of which she had come to be so ashamed of, her heart swelled fuller and fuller, and the tears, partly of wounded pride, partly of indignation, filled her eyes, while she mentally contrasted

her own appearance with that of her elegantly arrayed cousins. 'I cannot go to church among all these grand people,' she said to herself with angry mortification, as on nearing the village street she saw the groups of fashionably dressed strangers wending their way along in the direction of St. Mark's. 'Even Uncle Vincent is ashamed of me. I wish I could tell him that it is all Aunt Florence's meanness and unkindness'

Again the sound of the church bell struck on her ear, and the tones, more distinct now in their sweet fullness, reminded her strangely of the chime of the great town church which used to fill the air with music for her in the old happy days, when she and her mother, hand in hand, made their slow way along the crowded street to God's own house. Isobel's gloves had been shabby in those days too, but she did not mind it then. Her mother did not love her little daughter the less, nor hold her hand the less tenderly, because her clothes were not so fine as those of richer children. And—but what is it that the Lynton bell seems to be saying over and over again? she asked herself; is it reminding her that God, who invites His children to come to His house, does not mind in the least about their dress, however shabby? These chiming bells! How persistently they kept ringing this message in her ears! She could not but listen. Yes, and full well she knew that what they said was true. And now the bells changed their tones into quick notes of surprise, which seemed to ask, 'If God does not mind, then is it right to fret

'because of other people and of what they may think?' But at this point Ella noticed that the others were waiting for her to come up, and she quickened her steps to join them. . .

'I am sorry we have been leaving you to walk alone, Elfinette. Until this minute I fancied that ungallant fellow Lance was bringing up the rear with you. But'—this with a keen look at Isobel's shadowed face—'you must certainly confess now, little one, that you are tired out with this baking walk; you look it, at least.'

'It isn't that,' interjected Lancelot, the generous distributor of general information; 'it's just that she doesn't really want to go to church a bit, though she pretended she did.'

A sudden rush of colour crimsoned the little girl's cheeks, and she hung her head in distressed silence.

'Is that so?' asked Dr. Wilmott, with another of his keen looks at the child. 'You shall not go if you don't wish it. Perhaps you would rather rest under the trees somewhere.'

'It isn't that I am tired,' stammered Ella; 'I did want to go to church, and yet it is true that now I don't. But it isn't because I am tired, it is only because—because—because I am not good,' she ended in a low voice.

Again it struck Dr. Wilmott that in regard to one particular Frances had not been altogether wrong in her description of her orphan cousin. For this morning, at least, the master of Manor Coombe was finding

Isobel Elphinstone incomprehensible. The doctor's declaration to his sister-in-law, that young people were not much in his line, had been an unfortunate libel upon himself. But now, as with a man's horror of tears and a scene, he looked from Ella's reddening eyes and quivering lip to the bands of church-goers thronging the street, he wished himself well out of his present dilemma. His apprehensions were needless, however; Isobel Elphinstone had been taught in a hard school to exercise control over her feelings. An instant's struggle with the inclination to burst into tears, and the feeling was choked resolutely back. As she turned to walk on, her face, if a shade graver and quieter even than its wont, was otherwise as usual. With a vague idea that she needed cheering, the squire offered her his hand. He could see that her face brightened, but she said nothing, and it sobered again as a turn of the road brought them almost face to face with the church, which occupied a commanding position at the head of the village street.

With a start of mingled surprise and annoyance, Dr Wilmott saw the building in front of him. It had not been his intention to come so far as this. He had meant to see the children safely on their way, but he certainly had no mind to encounter the crowd of church-goers, many of them acquaintances, at the very door of the edifice. Still less had he for one moment contemplated making one of that morning's congregation. Nor was it too late even now to turn back. He knew that; yet, strange to say, he walked on. Something, he knew not what, seemed to impel him on-

wards. Was it the touch of the hand resting so confidently in his? Clearly, Ella had not a thought of his leaving them. Inwardly the unbelieving man of the world derided himself for his weakness, and again and again made feeble attempts to stop short. And still the hand resting in his seemed with unconscious strength to be leading him on, until, almost before he knew, he found himself taking off his hat in the church porch, and returning the salutations of a country neighbour, whose greeting expressed unmistakable surprise at the sight of the master of Manor Coombe a worshipper in St. Mark's.

Dr. Wilmott was not the man to care a straw for the criticisms of others. Above theirs he valued his own and just at the present moment he was taking himself severely to task for joining the ranks, not of the devout worshippers, but of the hypocrites he so stoutly affected to despise.

The verger, to whom the squire of Manor Coombe was well known, covering a gape of astonishment with an obsequious bow, was about to usher the party forward to the already well-filled pew belonging to the Manor, but the doctor, motioning him aside, led the way to an empty seat at the back under the shadow of the gallery pillars. The service was just about to begin, and for some little time the boys were too much occupied, first in finding their places in the Prayer-books the verger brought them, and then in studying their neighbours, to notice that their uncle, who rigidly kept his seat like a statue at the bottom of the pew, was joining neither in prayer nor praise.

They put it down as another of his queernesses, Lance deciding that he must hold the doctrine of an ancient gentleman in London who did not believe in kneeling, lest the ignorant onlookers should mistake the dignified deliberation of comparative youth for the rheumatic stiffness of old age. Little did Lance or any one else guess what was passing in the mind of the man who sat apparently so unmoved with cold averted face.

It was many years since Dr Wilmott had entered a church door. He had not anticipated the rush of emotions which would be stirred by the touch of memory's magic wand. Under its spell he was a boy again. He could see himself standing by his mother's side in the old family pew, he could hear her low voice fervently uttering the responses, he could feel her breath upon his cheek, as they knelt side by side, and together repeated the familiar words of the prayers, prayers which he knew she had fully believed would one day be answered for herself and for her boy. But for him they had not been heard, he said to himself, and in his heart there was a touch of bitterness.

But hark! what was that? The congregation were singing a hymn. But why should those simple words, and still simpler music, have such a strange effect upon him, threatening to unman him as he fought with the choking sensation in his throat, and the blinding tears that rushed into his eyes? It was his mother's favourite hymn, the hymn she had taught him when he was a boy. 'When he was a boy;' when was

that? He looked back through the long years, and he seemed to see three pictures of himself since then. First, he was the bright youth setting out in life, full of hope and confidence in himself; then the experienced, hard man of the world, the slave of the very world he had learnt to despise for its hollow shams, most of all for its religious shams; and lastly, the elderly man, who in his heart of hearts was ready to echo the wise king's bitter cry, 'All is vanity and vexation of spirit.'

Almost at the outset of his career in life, Vincent Wilmott's trust had been basely betrayed by a friend, who had, alas! been a great but a false professor of religion, and ever since that day, which had seen the deceiver's mask torn from him, young Wilmott, with a fierce and bitter scorn, had set his face against the very name of godliness. It is true, there had been times when, in spite of his determined resistance, the thoughts of his mother's God, and of his mother's prayers, would come back to his mind, filling him with a vague longing for which he vainly tried to despise himself.

And now, as he sat in the shadowed church pew, feeling so painfully alone among the throng of worshippers, who, try as he might, he could not believe were all hollow professors, there had come over him once more that soul hunger for the something without which his life had proved at bottom mere vanity and vexation of spirit.

To turn his thoughts, if possible, and drive away the memories awakened by that plaintive hymn, he

took his hand from his face, and glanced around him. His eyes fell upon his young charge. The boys were singing lustily, but with what realization of the words the doctor could but guess. He turned to Isobel; her eyes were on her book, but she was not singing, and on her brow there still rested that look of unchild-like gravity. 'What is bothering her?' wondered the doctor. 'Is she still worrying because she is not good? Well, after all, is not that my own secret burden described in childish language?' But why should infants have their happy innocent youth darkened by these soul shadows? Poor Elfinette! and I can give you no better comfort than this—that time will help to chase away the gloom, and you must then make the most of the short moments of forgetfulness, until the next fit of dark depression comes and chases away in its turn the short-lived gaiety.'

But even as he spoke this within himself, the girl looked up and caught his eyes fixed upon her. That look of his changed on the instant the current of her thoughts. Her head drooped again over her book, and her face was even graver than before, but it was from a different cause. Dr. Wilmott had not been far wrong when he had imagined she was worrying herself because she was not good. She had indeed been saying sadly to herself that her passionate anger towards her aunt, and her persistent peevish discontent, had not only spoilt her walk and made her ungracious to her uncle and cousins, but had unfitted her for joining in the service, much more for enjoying



it. 'It would be better, honester at least, not to sing at all, when I feel so bad,' she had said to herself. Then it was that she met her uncle's glance, and in a moment it flashed upon her the harm she might be doing. 'Uncle Vincent will feel quite sure now that I did not mean it, when I said I liked coming to church; and I did so want him to know that church was nice! Of course it is quite true that I am not good. But perhaps Jesus is grieved with me for not remembering that He can make me better.' For a minute her head was bent still lower over her book. Her uncle wondered whether she was crying. But the next instant, to his surprise, he saw her raise her head, with a brighter look on her face, and now he heard her voice, clear and sweet, joining in the last verse of the hymn. Throughout the rest of the service she sat very quiet and still in her corner, but there was an expression of gladness in her dark eyes not to be mistaken.

Dr. Wilmott heard little more of what was going on, until his attention was attracted by the preacher, an old man and a stranger, rising to give out his text: 'Not many wise . . . not many mighty, no, many noble, are called.'

Dr. Wilmott started. The words, if he had ever heard them before, had long been forgotten. He fixed his keen eyes on the clergyman. Something told him the speaker was no canting hypocrite, but one who in all sincerity was a believer in the great truth he proceeded so ably to unfold, a truth which most evidently was gladdening his own life, now nearly at its close,

with the brightest of hopes for the next. The discourse was powerful, yet clothed in language so simple, and brightened by such telling illustrations, that even the children's attention was caught. With flushed cheeks and eager eyes Ella followed every word, now and then turning a wistful glance towards her uncle, to see whether he was listening too. But the doctor never returned an answering look; he was absorbed. With bent head, and face shielded by his hand, he sat motionless. But he lost not a word; and as the sermon proceeded, the conviction gradually forced itself upon him that if the apostle's bold statement were true, it swept completely away his theory that personal unfitness formed a barrier between man and his Creator.

At the conclusion of the service he tried to shake off the impression the sermon had made upon him; and, as if annoyed at his own weakness in allowing himself to be carried away by plausible but undoubtedly fanatical religious sentiment, he led the way out of the building, wearing his coldest and most satirical expression.

Poor Ella had hoped for an effect quite different from this, and it checked the eager words which had risen to her lips. She walked on silently by the side of her uncle, who, with a manner more brusque even than usual, was returning the salutations of his acquaintances as they left the building. Suddenly a thought struck the doctor, and he arrested himself. 'You must drive back,' he said to Isobel. 'That long walk in this broiling heat would be too much for you.'

Ella did not venture to protest, though she would have much preferred to walk, partly to be with him, partly because she did not know whether her cousins would welcome her shabby little self as an addition to the gay party, now lingering about the church porch, while waiting for the carriages to come up from the stables. Not caring to join the chattering group, the doctor took a turn with Ella in a quiet side street.

'Elfinette,' he asked abruptly, 'did you like that sermon?'

Her face brightened. 'Oh yes,' she replied, half shyly, half eagerly. 'The clergyman just said in clever words what I couldn't explain about God's not choosing us because we were great or wise or good.' Then, with a painful recollection of the failure of the morning, she added humbly, 'You know, Uncle Vincent, if we had had to be good first, before God could choose us, then I could never have belonged to Him.'

The squire glanced curiously at her. 'You say you belong to God, little one. How are you sure of that?'

Ella thought for a minute. 'When I know that I have done something He would not have liked me to do, then I am sorry to have grieved Him, and when I think I have pleased Him, it makes me glad,' was her simple answer.

Rather hesitatingly, for he hardly liked to shake her childish faith, or even to give her pain, he continued, 'I do not quite understand, Elfinette. You say you belong to God, that you are one of His chosen

ones. Now, we know that the Supreme Being, if He is anything at all, is altogether holy and altogether good. Yet you call yourself wicked. How, then, can such as you, sinful as you say, afford pleasure to the pure and sinless One ?'

A quick flush of distress mounted to Isobel's forehead. For the moment she was confused by the doctor's sudden presenting of what she had never before seen as a difficulty. She hardly knew how to meet it. 'God receives us even though we are sinful and bad. He -- He -- He, I think our badness doesn't make any difference,' she said at last, but hesitatingly, as if not quite sure, even in her own mind, of her ground.

'Come, come,' interrupted Dr. Wilmott, unable to resist the temptation to tease this young theologian, whose persistency amused him. 'You are not painting your King in royal colours, if you represent Him as indifferent to the rank and character of the members of His court. An earthly monarch picks his courtiers from among the great and good of his nobility. They, and they alone, are considered fit to be his friends. To associate with those beneath him, the degraded and the mean, would be but to proclaim himself unworthy of the name of king. And would you have me believe that the King of kings is less royal than the earth's puniest sovereign ?'

Ella looked at him, more and more puzzled and uneasy. 'God is perfect. He is the all-perfect God,' she began, then stopped, uncertain.

'Then nothing short of perfection can or should

satisfy Him. The All-holy must be surrounded by creatures, humbler indeed it must be than Himself, but not less holy, not less pure,' was the doctor's quick reply, spoken now rather to himself than to her.

She could not answer him, and as he saw her look of real distress, he regretted the impulse that had prompted him to speak the words which had given her pain. But nothing more could be said just then, for at that moment the carriages drove up. The doctor found a corner for Ella in the waggonette, and mounting the boys to their delight on the box-seat, walked home alone.

On his arrival at the Manor he found Isobel waiting for him under a shady tree on the lawn. He looked keenly at her, hoping to find that the drive home had banished from her mind all recollection of the knotty points in theology which had been under discussion. But the sight of her face smote him with self-reproach. He could see plainly enough by her preoccupied air that their last conversation was still uppermost in her thoughts. Indeed, had he but known it, by reason of her perplexity and distress of mind both the pleasures and the pains of the drive from church had been lost upon her. She had seen neither the lovely landscape, nor the black looks cast by her cousins at the hands, which all unconsciously she had folded in her lap with the most conspicuously rubbed fingers of her shabby gloves placed prominently in view.

'Elfinette,' began the doctor in a light tone, 'your

small head has studied theology long enough for one day. Let it have a holiday now.'

She laid her hand timidly on his arm. 'Uncle Vincent, I cannot answer' rightly what you said about our King, I mean the King of kings and His court; but I think I know why He has chosen me to belong to Him, though I am not great or good. I am just one of the weak and foolish things that nobody cares much about. But Jesus cares, and He pleaded with God for me. It is all for Jesus' sake. Because He died for us He can ask His Father for anything He likes. And so, though I don't know why, I think He asked for me.'

To this the squire made no reply, but, taking Ella's hand in his, walked in thoughtful silence towards the house, where the gong for luncheon was sounding.

'Uncle Vincent,' shouted Lance, who along with Charlie came tearing up at the sight of the doctor, 'we've found an old scythe in the tool-house, and after lunch we are going to mow the grass for you in the glen. It's far too long.'

'You shall do nothing of the kind!' thundered the doctor, with a vehemence that produced a momentary upset of Lancelot's usually imperturbable composure. 'Sunday is not over yet, if church is. Moreover, and now, do you hear me, boys, and you, Lance, in particular? you have both got to wait till you are older before you experiment at Manor Coombe with scythes, be they old or young. These are my commands.'

With that Dr. Wilmott, falling again into the reverie

from which the boys had roused him, turned into the house ; and for the rest of that Sunday the guests at Manor Coombe saw little or nothing of their eccentric host, who had shut himself up in his study, having given peremptory orders that he was not to be disturbed.

CHAPTER V

SUNNY DAYS

CELLA! Cinder! Cinderella!' The call echoed all over the house, as the two boys galloped excitedly up and down the stairs and along the corridors of the Manor. 'Of course she'll be in old Forty Thieves' still-room, eating up the cakes and things. That's where she always is,' suggested Lance at length.

And sure enough it was in the housekeeper's store-room that the truant was found, not eating cake, however, but stoning raisins by the open window, through which came the perfume of roses and honeysuckle, mingling not unpleasantly with the odour of stored fruits, spices, and dainties of all kinds.

'Ho! Cinderella, stop that, and come and get your bow and arrows. We three can have the field and the targets for an hour just now before the grown-ups begin their practice. Hurry up!'

But Isobel surveyed the heap of unstoned fruit by her side, and ruefully shook her head.

'Bother! what have you to do with the stoning of these old raisins? It isn't your work.'

‘No; but to-day it is Mrs. Forrtreaves’. Cook has a sick headache, and is cross. Mrs. Forrtreaves promised to prepare this fruit for her, but she has forgotten, and gone off to the Home Farm to see about chickens’

‘Well,’ broke in Charlie impatiently, ‘let old Forty Thieves keep her own promises, and mind her own business, and you mind yours, which surely is to practise your archery when you can get the chance, or else there isn’t the ghost of a hope of your winning the golden arrow-brooch at the match.’

‘Yes, that is my business, I know; but I think this is, too. When Mrs. Forrtreaves comes back, it will be too late for the raisins. She will be so vexed, and cook will be—’

‘Crosspatch. Let her blaze herself up the chimney if she likes; it doesn’t matter a straw to us.’

‘Yes, it does,’ returned Ella, going on busily with her self-appointed task, and keeping a sharp look-out the while on Master Lance, whose peculiarly elastic theory with regard to the eighth commandment, when frogs and raisins were concerned, was well known to her. ‘When cook gets into a temper, she says she will go away.’

‘Let her. Who cares?’

‘Mrs. Forrtreaves will. Cook is clever; and when the house is full of visitors, we need a clever cook. Uncle Vincent likes to have everything just right and nice, and if cook went off, it might not be easy to get another, and then Uncle Vincent might be worried, and——’

'I see; and if he's in a towering wax, then we might catch it all round,' assented the intelligent Lancelot, dodging nearer to the raisin bowl. 'And so you're doing Cinderella, like as you do at home, to help to keep him sweet.'

'You don't understand, Lance, a bit. I would do anything I could to help Mrs. Forttreaves and Uncle Vincent, just because they are so good to us. You had better go off, and shoot, both of you. I'll come when I can.'

Charlie's impatience, however, had been giving way under the pressure of his cousin's arguments. 'No, that wouldn't be fair,' he said, unexpectedly letting himself drop down on Ella's low window-seat with a thud that shook the preserve jars on their shelves. 'We'll help. Lance, you must squirt the stones out with your left thumb, your right is all over tar and blacking'

'All right,' quoth that young gentleman, surreptitiously conveying to his mouth a fine trio of captured raisins highly seasoned with the said tar and blacking. 'But I won't stone a single one, unless the Cinder promises to tell us a fairy-tale all the time.'

'There was once a horrible boy who stole and ate so many pudding raisins that the fairies were angry, and changed him into a vine. And for ever afterwards, instead of being able to eat other people's raisins, other people came and ate every one of his, and he never got so much as one for himself.'

The tale being ended, and Charlie having pointed

the moral with a smart poke in his brother's ribs, the latter in high dudgeon took himself off.

'I think,' said Ella, in a cautious whisper, after glancing round twice, 'to make sure that the retreating footsteps were not returning, 'I think we may have a few raisins each, for Mrs. Forrtreaves told me I might help myself to some of her good things whenever I wanted to very much. I haven't liked to do it before, but——'

'All right. I'll take six, and you six. There's plenty, and they're jolly fat ones' And Charlie, having washed his hands in a tea-cup, out of what he considered gentlemanlike deference to one of the Cinder's fads, set to work in earnest. 'I declare we'll have them done in less than no time, and that ought to leave plenty of time over, though I don't exactly know how much by the rules of arithmetic, for the targets. I dare say these other creatures—they've gone out riding—won't be so mean as to be punctual in turning us off the field when their turn comes. You know, Cinder, I want just awfully to be the lucky fellow that wins the tip-topper skates at the match, and I suppose you're half crazy to win the prize on the girls' side.'

'Yes, I am; for I haven't a nice brooch at all of my own, and this one is a beauty. Uncle Vincent showed it to me. He said he thought, if I took pains, I might win it, for I had a steady hand and a good aim.'

Although in point of fact the raisin-stoning was not done in less than no time, the minutes sped like seconds to the two workers, so engrossed were they

in eager talk about the event of all-important importance about the approaching archery fête, which was to take place at Manor Coombe in about a month's time. Dr. Snessmott, as captain of the archery club and the leading squire of the district, was getting up the match and providing the prizes. To the annoyance of Francis who considered that the introduction of the juvenile element always detracted from the dignity of the seniors, the doctor had opened the lists to the young people of his acquaintance, who were to compete at shorter ranges, but for equally tempting prizes.

'Hooray!' cried Charlie, tossing his last raisin into the fruit bowl. 'Now for the target, if that young Lance hasn't shot the bull's eye into shreds now. Bother washing your hands!' for Ella had dashed into the pantry close by, and was splashing hurriedly at the tap. 'Hurry up!'

'Oh, I'm ready. My hands will finish drying in the sun.'

At full speed the two ran along the corridors to the front of the house, but at the doctor's private room Isobel pulled up and knocked. 'There's no one there,' she said, after waiting a moment. 'It shall just go in and get my bow. Uncle Vincent took it from me to tighten the string.' But she had no sooner entered the study than, with an exclamation of dismay, she called after Charlie, who had raced on. 'You must go without me after all. I can't come.'

'Whatever can be the matter now?' shouted the boy, in considerable irritation. 'You've stoned

'Raisins, and washed both your hands, what's left under?'

'Just see the mess here! Uncle Vincent won't let body but Mrs. Forrtreaves dust his room, and put papers and things tidy; but I suppose cook put out so this morning that she forgot the study as I as the raisins. Uncle has gone to see some sick son this morning, and when he comes back he want to find his room neat and nice, and it won't unless I stay and tidy it. Oh dear! things are as cross and crooked this morning.'

Apparently Charlie thought it was a case of things already gone, judging by the exasperated roar went down the corridor. 'Cinderella, you're a per-
 -ass. First you act cook, and now you want to be housemaid, and for no reason on earth, that I see, except to spoil the fun.'

In an offended tone and raised voice, for Charlie stood obstinately in keeping at a distance, Ella said, 'You are unkind and unfair. It isn't to please self that I want to act housemaid. And it's not fun, but only my own, that I am spoiling. You go off this very moment and practise with Lance. Practise with Lance!' echoed Charlie, in tones of scorn. 'I might as well shoot with a pop-gun. A conceited ape that thinks himself as good as Robin Hood of hitting the bull's eye a mile off. I wouldn't be cocksure of his hitting a bull's eye if it stood right in front of his nose!'

Isobel, whose feelings were ruffled, vouchsafed no answer, and retiring into the study, shut the door

with a significantly resounding bang. She set about her second self-imposed task with an ungraciousness of manner and dangerously impatient touch, muttering angrily to herself the while: 'It's hard that, when I do things I would much rather not, to help Mrs. Forrtreaves or Uncle Vincent, I do not even get thanks for it. Charlie scolds, and Uncle Vincent will not say, "Thank you," for he will never know I did it.'

The laborious dusting was over at last, and the room set to rights, all but the writing-table, where lay a mass of papers which the doctor's 'handlessness,' as Mrs. Forrtreaves called it, had contrived as usual to bring into a condition of woful confusion. Ella had to be very slow and careful here, but, as she had once assisted the housekeeper to restore his chaos to order, she knew how to set about the delicate task. She was just lightly flicking off the remaining grains of dust from a heap of old letters lying on the desk, when her eye caught sight of an open book half hidden underneath. It was old and worn, with yellow stains upon the edges of the leaves. Through the window that Ella had opened to admit the fresh air the summer breeze sprang into the room, and, in playful frolic, lightly touched the leaves, which fluttered back, and disclosed the writing on the title-page. 'Margaret Vincent mott,' read Ella. With reverent fingers she took the book, and laid a paper-weight upon it. 'It is my mother's Bible, and he must be reading it,' she whispered softly to herself.

For a minute or two she stood quite still.

folded hands and softened face, looking down at the old book. She was thinking of the gentle mother who, long ago, had read and loved that same old book, and then leaving it behind her, had gone to be with the Saviour of whom it spoke. Presently Isobel stepped noiselessly through the open French window, and sat down under a laurel-bush on the sloping lawn outside. 'Mrs. Forrtreaves says Uncle Vincent's mother was, oh! so good and sweet! I think she must have been like my own dear mother.' Here a heavy sigh escaped her, and unconsciously she spoke her next thought aloud. 'I begin to think I shall never be good, like the really good people. Even when I try to do right, I spoil it by the way I do it. Just now, for instance, I spoilt the trying to do something to help Uncle Vincent and Mrs. Forrtreaves by being as cross as two sticks to Charlie, and hanging the things I was dusting till I knocked some of them over and nearly broke them. I wish I didn't get cross so quickly!'

'You *were* rather huffy,' returned Charlie, suddenly rolling into view from beneath a massive low-spread-ing bay, where he had been stretched at full length, too deep at first in *Robinson Crusoe* to notice when his cousin stepped from the study. 'And I dare say it's quite proper for you to repent; but for mercy's sake don't go on repenting forty times, as you generally do. Even for a girl once is enough. But if you're craving for something to help you to settle down for an hour's lodging in the glums, here it is. The whole jing-bang of the grown-up archers are in the possession of the field, firing away like mad, twelve yards

askew from the targets. 'We've lost our innings for to-day, and you know whose fault it is.'

This last undeserved fling was hard to take in good part. Ella had to wait for a moment, before she was able to answer quietly, 'I am sorry.'

Her gentleness disarmed Charlie. 'Fudge! it was caddish of me to blackguard you.' And having made amends by using the strong language against himself, he continued cheerfully 'Don't you bother. You and I shall get up to-morrow morning with the cocks, and have a go-bang at the targets before breakfast.' Ella's face brightened. 'But I say, Cinder, why do you make yourself so cheap doing things for Uncle Vincent? I could understand it, if it was Fan or Bee that slaved themselves to get into his good graces, for every mother's son of them hopes he'll choose her to stay and queen it for ever and ever at Manor Coombe; but I don't for the life of me see why *you* should bother. Even if you'd been grown-up, which you aren't, you wouldn't have had the ghost of a chance against these two. Mother said Uncle Vincent never could bear stupid or ugly people. Well, I'm just as glad. I'd as soon Fan or Bee stayed behind when we go home. They are not a bit of good to a fellow, and you are.'

'Charlie, do you think I am really ugly?' timidly asked Isobel, after a moment's painful hesitation.

'How on earth can I tell? But I've heard mother say to people that you were a very plain child.' The words were not unkindly meant, but it was impossible not to feel hurt at the blunt statement of fact.

The quick sensitive colour crimsoned the girl's cheeks. Her cousin looked critically at her. 'When you paint your face like that, *I* think you don't look bad. But, you see, if you count off your eyes and your nose, there's so little left of you to call a face. But, after all, the mother may be mistaken; she often is. You know, she calls toads and earwigs ugly, and, of course, they aren't.'

It was something to be elevated even to the rank of an earwig, and Ella might have cheered up, had she not received another quencher.

'Frances is awfully clever; she knows the names of all the English prime ministers of the present day, and can talk to Uncle Vincent about them. And when callers come, and he's out, she knows quite well what to say to them, though she has never seen them between the eyes before. Could you do all that if you were grown-up?' Ella shook her head. The contemplation of such immeasurable superiority was depressing. 'Oh, well, it doesn't really matter a brass farthing, for you're not grown-up, and you're not his niece besides, so there's an end of it.'

With that he returned once more to his book, and Ella sat on in silence, her chin resting on her hand, and her eyes fixed dreamily on the far distant horizon, where only by a dim grey line could one tell where the sky and sea met.

'I never did know the like of that fellow Crusoe! Just listen to this, Cinder;' and Charlie with much enthusiasm read aloud a glowing passage from the life of his hero. 'Wasn't he a splendid brick of a fellow?'

Ella's 'Yes' betrayed, however, a lukewarmness so unworthy of Robinson Crusoe that his admirer looked up in inquiring indignation. A smile hovered on the girl's lips; clearly it had nothing to do with the adventurer in question. 'What on earth are you grinning to yourself about in that idiotic fashion, Cinderella Elphinstone?' he demanded, half scornfully.

She coloured and shook her head. 'I can't tell you. You would call me a prig.'

'And if I did, I should only be a good little boy for speaking the truth. Besides,' he urged, curiosity getting the better of him, 'I haven't had the chance to call you a prig for the last three days. My tongue's growing stiff. Fire away, then; if you don't, as sure as my name's Methuselah. I'll invent a way to make you.'

Well aware that he was capable of making good this threat, Ella discreetly yielded. 'I was just thinking of what you said, you know, about my being stupid and ugly——'

'Tell the truth, Cinderella Elphinstone. A liar is a worse thing even than a prig. It wasn't me, but mother. So there ——'

Unheeding this interruption, Ella continued in a low voice, shielding her face with her hand. 'At first I was vexed, and I wondered why—when it would have been so easy to Him—why God had not made everybody pretty and clever alike. I thought how nice it would have been if I could have grown up beautiful and wise, so that some kind uncle, like dear Uncle Vincent, should have chosen me to live with him, and

help him all I could. But then I remembered what the clergyman said on Sunday about God choosing us; even when we were just weak and foolish and mean, and not even good. And I thought that seemed to make the rest not matter quite so much.'

She came to an abrupt stop, and waited, fully expecting Charlie to tell her that she was far and away beyond being an ordinary prig now. But instead came the question, 'Ella, do you think it's true that Uncle Vincent doesn't believe in God, or the Bible, or anything?'

A troubled look stole over the girl's face. 'I don't think he loves God,' she said slowly. 'I think it's because he doesn't know that God loves him. Oh, I wish he did——'

The sound of a step moving about the study startled the pair, who had thought the room still empty, as when Ella had found it an hour before; and as Dr. Wilmott stepped on to the lawn through the open window, their eyes asked each other apprehensively how much of the conversation had he heard. But the doctor did not say, and his face, on which certainly there was a curious expression, was to them unreadable.

'Why are you not taking advantage of this fine morning to practise for the archery match, instead of lolling idly on this sunny slope?' he asked, with mock fierceness.

Charlie explained that the grown-ups were cocky, and did not like the juniors to interfere with their innings, which they held on to from morning till night, when it so pleased their highnesses.

'We shall see about that,' promptly responded the squire. 'There must be fair play. If they monopolize the morning, then you three shall have as your right the afternoons, no man interfering.' So saying, he marched off in the direction of the archery field.

The cousins looked after him admiringly. 'Let's go and see how the Great Moguls take the news,' quoth Charlie, after a moment, starting up and dragging Ella along with him.

On the way they met one of the under-gardeners. 'Did you see my brother anywhere, John?' asked Charlie.

'Us has sced him a-mowin' of the hay in the plantation. Us has telled him not, but him as good as said that the squire has a-gived him leave.'

The cousins exchanged glances, and with one consent turned and made for the plantation, where they found the object of their search, so absorbed in the labour of making unskilful hackings at the tufty grass, that he did not know of the approach of his trackers until they were upon him.

'How naughty of you, Lance, when Uncle Vincent forbade you!' indignantly exclaimed Ella, taking care to stand at a safe distance from the grasshopper-like sweepings of the dilapidated old scythe; while Charlie, with a fierce, 'You scamp! And you don't care either, though you get us into a scrape as well as yourself!' laid forcible hands on the scythe shaft, with the dangerous intention of wrenching it from the other's grasp.

'Keep your tongues and hands to yourself!' shouted

the enraged Lancelot. 'Shut up there, Charlie; you'll be slicing my legs off, you duffer! I can do that for myself, if I want to.' . .

'As if Uncle Vincent had nothing better to do with his money than to be everlastingly buying you wooden stumps!' scornfully retorted his brother, still continuing his hazardous tuggings at the scythe.

Ella, fearful of the consequences of the struggle, and ever ready of resource, called out, 'Charlie, let go! Some one will be hurt. I know what we shall do. Uncle Vincent is arranging for us three to have the archery field to ourselves every afternoon, and if Lance doesn't promise not to touch that scythe again, we shall not let him practise with us, and we shall tell Uncle Vincent the reason why.'

The mower scowled. He knew by experience that the Cinder's word was as sure of being cashed as a Bank of England note, and he had no idea of cutting off his nose to spite his face. He let the scythe fall with a thud upon the ground, just as Dr. Wilmott, attracted by the sound of their angry voices, came upon the scene.

'So,' he said, looking from Lancelot to the rusty tool, 'you forgot, I suppose, what I said about this mowing scheme of yours, sir.'

'No, I didn't,' boldly returned the young gentleman. 'I remembered. You said I was to wait till I was older, and I did. I waited a week.'

The squire cleared his throat. 'Ahem! all right,' he said, with an unmoved countenance. 'I should have seen to it that our calculations, yours and mine,

as to time should have more nearly corresponded. It was natural that yours should have been the stingier of the two. I had thought of not less than 260 weeks. One is gone, so please to understand that, at the end of 259 weeks from now, and not till then, the question of scythe-mowing on the estate of Manor Coombe may be re-opened between us' Turning to the other two, he continued, 'Meet me in the archery field at three. You will be all the better for a few hints from an old hand like me.' And with that he marched off to speak to one of the workmen he saw at a little distance.

'Big bear, that he is!' resentfully muttered Lance, as he fell to kicking the rusty scythe. 'I just wish I knew of a bigger one to pound his bones for him!'

'It's fine to say behind his back what you wouldn't dare to say to his face,' was Charlie's soothing comment. 'I know I'd rather, if I had to choose, live in the bear's den than in a hay paddock with a donkey like you.'

'I'll make you eat your words, and then I'll fight you,' loftily retorted his brother, and straightway marched off to where Dr. Wilmott still stood in conversation with his forester. Plucking his uncle by the sleeve to command attention, the young hero announced defiantly, 'I said you were a big bear, and I wished there was a bigger to eat you.'

'I am sorry you have taken so much trouble to acquaint me with your amiable wish,' said the squire freezingly, 'for at this moment I am quite unable to gratify it. However, should I ever have the mis-

fortune to meet with the quadruped after whom you pinc, I shall be pleased to introduce him to his relation, an interesting, though unmannerly, young cub of my acquaintancc.'

Lancelot looked mystified. 'I had to come and tell you,' he muttered, 'or else, of course, Charlie and I couldn't have fought our duel. We can now.' With this cheerful explanation he retired.

Dr. Wilmott took a step after him, then stopped irresolute, a frown of mingled perplexity and vexation on his brow. 'I was a fool to have these untamed young whelps here with no one to look after them! The scapegraces! Who knows what they will be up to next? I declare, it's no matter for laughter. It's more likely to be manslaughter, if not with scythes, then with fists. I can tell them, of course, that the anti-duellist laws hold good on Manor Coombe, but of what avail? They will simply adjourn to the Devil's Cheese Ring, as more congenial ground.'

Moodily retracing his steps to the scene of Lancelot's late mowing operations, the squire, to his surprise, found the trio comfortably established in a shady corner, engaged in a most amicable discussion. With her old-fashioned womanly tact, Ella was advising the postponement of the duel in a speech which was suggestive rather than dictatorial, her argument being that, if by any unlucky accident either of the combatants got disabled in the fray, and was thereby prevented from competing at the archery match, the fighting game would not be worth the candle. At once the boys saw the force of the suggestion, and dismissing

with perfect indifference their recent red-hot antagonism, laid their heads together in a friendly conclave over the programme which the three had chalked out for that afternoon, but which must now be altered in favour of the archery practice.

‘I suppose,’ muttered the squire to himself, as he walked off in the direction of the Manor, the lines in his forehead smoothing themselves out, ‘I suppose that elf is a match for them, though I am not. And yet that scamp of a Lance, who boasts that he has more brute force in his little finger than she has in her whole body, hasn’t the ghost of a suspicion that at this present moment it is *her* little finger he is being twisted round !

CHAPTER VI

NEW FRIENDS

THE days and weeks of summer were succeeding each other very rapidly at Manor Coombe, so rapidly indeed that, whenever Isobel Elphinstone had the courage to count how many had gone, she would say to herself with a sigh, 'Soon, only too soon, there will come the time when I shall have to say, "This is the last week, the very last; the next we must go back to London!"' Poor child! there was small wonder if she contrasted drearily the home in Cavendish Square with happy Manor Coombe, beautiful Manor Coombe, where love and kindness had done their best to bring back the sunshine to her orphaned life. There were times when she could fain have wished that the days might succeed each other more slowly, more monotonously; but the wish was vain, for each one seemed to be fuller and swifter than the last.

There were the busy mornings, when she never failed to find some little things to do in order to help Mrs. Forrtreaves; and the old housekeeper was learn-

ing, all unconsciously, to depend upon the willing hands and feet of her little handmaiden. In the afternoons, if no expedition or picnic interfered, there were the archery practisings for the fête now close at hand. Under the squire's kind tuition, Ella and the boys were becoming such good shots, that among their elders the trio went by the name of 'The young Robin Hoods.' Ella greatly prized these afternoons with Dr. Wilmott, for during the rest of the day he was generally occupied, busy out of doors or in his study. And after dinner, his leisure time, she never appeared in the drawing-room, not even on the occasions when the boys thought fit to do so.

Isobel would not have called her evenings dull, however. For the most part she spent them in the housekeeper's room, listening over and over again to Mrs. Forrtreaves' reminiscences of the long ago, or deciphering to the old lady's delight the faded writing of a bundle of old letters, which served to recall connectedly* the almost forgotten histories of the days when Manor Coombe was the holiday house of grand-aunts and uncles and cousins, of whom Ella had scarcely even heard. There were frequent interruptions to this cosy reading and talking, but to these Mrs. Forrtreaves had now grown quite accustomed. Leaving the door of the room slightly ajar, Ella would keep one ear open for the sound of music from the distant drawing-room; and as the first notes of a violoncello fell on her listening ear, she would spring from her seat, letting the letters drop on the floor, and dart away. With a smile Mrs. Forr-

treaves would gather up the scattered sheets, and patiently await the child's return, when the two would resume their talk where it had been left off, as if there never had come a break.

One morning Dr. Wilmott was taking a stroll in his favourite walk, a shady avenue of fine beeches. Unconscious of his near neighbourhood, the boys, on the other side of the high hedge, were grubbing for worms for their fishing-hooks, while not far off on a mossy bank sat Ella, singing softly to herself as she mended the holes in Charlie's Sunday gloves. Her own were no longer a source of anxiety to her. She had been presented with two pairs of beautiful new ones by Dr. Wilmott. They would have no holes in them for ever and ever so long.

Suddenly the doctor stopped short in his thoughtful tramp to listen to the low humming of the song without words. The melody was from a favourite nocturne of his, one of Chopin's, and he stood amazed at the clear and correct rendering of the somewhat difficult passage.

'What in all the creation is that you've been droning at for the last hour, Cinder? Is it "Pickaninny"?' demanded Lancelot, who prided himself on having a musical ear for the popular street ditties of the day.

'Lancelot!' exclaimed Ella, with indignant scorn. '"Pickaninny," indeed! Why, don't you know it is the lovely thing Uncle Vincent plays so often? It is by some great German man, I forget his name.'

'Well, I wasn't so very far wrong,' loftily retorted

Lance. 'I knew it was some trash I had heard over and over till I was sick. And so it just was. So you needn't be so cocky, Miss Cinderella.'

'Charlie,' said Ella, ignoring this speech, and pursuing her own train of thought, 'do you not think that if Uncle Vincent had been born in Germany, he would for certain have been Mozart or Beethoven or somebody? He plays on his 'cello so—so wonderfully'

Before Charlie could risk his reputation for wisdom by venturing on a reply to this, Lance struck in. 'I am glad he wasn't. He'd have lived all his life in a hurdy-gurdy. and in the summer holidays there wouldn't have been much room for us and the din as well'

At this juncture the squire's by no means insignificant figure made a passage for itself through a gap in the hedge. 'Elfinette, I did not know until now that you had such a good ear for music. How comes it that you know that nocturne so well? You never come to the drawing-room in the evenings.'

'She listens behind the door,' Lance promptly informed him. 'Whenever she hears your 'cello begin to groan, quick as a flash she bolts off from poor old Forty Thieves, rushes head-foremost downstairs, and pulls herself up with her ear at the key-hole of the drawing-room door, where she stands, like Lot's wife, and listens.'

'On the other side of the door would be better still for listening, Elfinette, would it not? I supposed you never cared to come down in the evenings, but,

like the boys, preferred freedom and bagatelle to the musical soirées of the drawing-room.'

Isobel involuntarily glanced down at her dress, and hesitated, hardly knowing how to reply to this. 'The music is better than bagatelle,' she said wistfully, 'but——'

'Put on a white frock this evening, and come to the drawing-room. I promise you shall have as much music as you like.'

The colour flushed into the child's face. 'I do not have a white frock, uncle. I have no evening dress at all.'

The squire gazed at her with a puzzled look. 'I am sorry,' he said at length, in a tone of comical regret, 'I am indeed sorry that I cannot lend you one. But what do you do when you are in London, child?'

'I do not need a white dress there. I never go into the drawing-room in the evenings. My aunt would not like me to. And when there is company, I help Grace, the parlour-maid, who always has so much to do on party nights.'

There was a momentary flash in the doctor's eyes, but Ella did not see it, for his glance softened as he turned to her. 'I don't know whether anything can be done for this evening now. Not that *I* should care a straw what you wore, but I suppose other people would make it uncomfortable for you, Elfinette. I'm afraid that even white gauze would be too heavy for the telegraph to bring down from London. Let us go and consult Mrs. Forrtreaves.

She might offer to lend you her new black silk to drown yourself in for once.'

The housekeeper took in the situation at once. 'Deed then, squire, and if it's my little missie you're wanting to steal from me of an evening, her that makes it so lightsome for a body, then it would not be like you, Master Vincent, to blame me, if I'm a bit backward in hurrying things on. But— —'

'I am not going to give up the happy times in your room, dear Mrs. Forrtreaves,' cried Ella, throwing her arms round her old friend's neck, and hugging her warmly. 'We shall manage to get our nice times together somehow.'

The old lady returned the embrace with interest. 'I wonder now,' she murmured half to herself, 'I wonder I haven't laid by in a drawer some bits of frocks that your cousin, Mrs. Travers, left here, doctor. She said there was no use taking them out to India, for Miss Jenny had outgrown them. I wonder now— Just leave it to me and Lizzie, squire. We'll lay our heads together, and see what we can do.'

Lizzie was a sewing-maid, a delicate girl to whom the doctor was giving a home at the Manor until her health was restored for more active service.

After an investigation of the dresses in the drawer, the two women found a frock which would just suit their purpose, and the pair settled themselves for a busy day's work. The result of their labours was highly satisfactory, and the seamstresses considered themselves amply rewarded for their toil, when they



had arrayed Miss Isobel in a dress which was no less well-fitting than becoming.

‘Doesn’t she look sweet?’ whispered Lizzie, as she and Mrs. Fortreaves leant over the balustrades and watched the slight, graceful little figure in the simple pink crêpe move shyly downstairs to the drawing-room, where the boys, having heard a rumour of the Cinder’s début, had condescended to grace the occasion with their best velvet and satin suits.

‘My eyes! what a stunner!’ was Lancelot’s greeting, while Charlie, critically turning his cousin round and round, gave it as his opinion that the fairy god-mother must have arrived, and that the next thing would be the pumpkin, and——

‘Shut up!’ interrupted Lance. ‘Here come the silks and satins. Let us see what they all think of Cinderella.’

The ladies were most polite to Isobel, and one or two, seeing the child’s shy, flitting colour, spoke kindly to her, and tried to put her at her ease. The Miss Wilmotts, however, took no notice of her, and Ella had the uncomfortable suspicion that underneath their suave company manners was annoyance at her appearance. But with the entrance of Dr. Wilmott all was well.

‘Ah, Elfinette, here you are! How nice you look, child-elf! Well, I promised you a feast of music, did I not? You shall have it then. And as for me, I shall play my bestest best, inspired by the knowledge that this evening, for the first time, a most appreciative listener is present.’

While the music was going on, and there were many good performers in the company, the doctor now and again threw an amused glance towards the low chair, where Ella sat for nearly an hour, so absorbed and fascinated by the concert as to be deaf and blind to all else.

Presently, in a pause, he came beside her. 'And so you love music, child-elf?' She smiled brightly for reply. 'Do you play?'

She shook her head. 'Once I could a little,' she said, her face shadowing. 'Mother taught me, and I loved it so. But since I came to London I have forgotten it all. Aunt Florence did not like me to practise on the grand piano in the drawing-room, and she could not afford to give me lessons.'

'Elfinette, how would you like to learn the violin?' Ella's eyes sparkled. The doctor smiled. 'I shall telegraph to London for one to be sent down immediately. And every morning, after breakfast, you shall come to me for half-an-hour's lesson. If I am not mistaken, you elf, you have the soul of a violinist in you.'

'My eyes!' quoth Lancelot to himself, from where he stood within earshot. 'Am not I glad not to have to stand in her shoes? If she's not run out as thin as a fiddle-string herself before he's pounded away at her for a week, my name's not Nebuchadnezzar.'

Still Ella said nothing, from sheer inability to find words, but her shining eyes and flushed cheeks spoke for her, and the doctor was well satisfied. Two

days later, and the music-lessons were an established fact, to the unalloyed satisfaction of both master and pupil.

In the absorbing interest of her violin studies, Isobel was sometimes tempted to neglect other duties less delightful. But she was naturally affectionate, and quick to show herself grateful for kindness. So that, whatever and whoever might suffer through her devotion to her new pleasure, Mrs. Forrtreaves, at any rate, had seldom any reason to complain of neglect.

And still the days and weeks, fuller than ever, flew on apace, and the golden glory of the summer was fast sobering into the mellowed brightness of early autumn. Nor was Isobel Elphinstone the only one who had found the summer pass all too swiftly at Manor Coombe. Her cousins, Frances and Beatrice, no less than the boys, were quite of her opinion, and would, like her, have hindered the flight of time, had they but known how. One and all, they had found the Manor a charming Liberty Hall, and its master generosity itself in providing for the comfort and pleasure of his guests. True, he had his old-bachelor peculiarities, some of which proved but little to the taste of the young Wilmotts; and Frances' proud nature often secretly rebelled against the irksomeness of humouring what she called her uncle's unreasonable whims and prejudices. Being extremely anxious, however, to conciliate him, she generally managed to conceal all symptoms of irritation; and it was not long before she flattered herself she was rapidly be-

coming indispensable to the squire and his large household. Nevertheless, she occasionally missed her opportunity.

‘Would it spoil your appetite to dine this evening in a morning gown, Frances; or at least in your plainest evening one?’ her uncle asked one day.

‘I fear it might, Uncle Vincent, for my good taste would suffer,’ was her quick reply.

The squire shrugged his shoulders. ‘That were too great a sacrifice, truly, to demand of you,’ he said, half lightly, half satirically, but with a keen look at his niece’s proud, handsome face.

Somewhat uneasy at his tone, and anxious to change the subject, which she did not wish carried on to an explanation that might put her in a difficulty, she referred, with apparent inadvertence, but in reality with significance, to the fact that Sir Evelyn Barnes, M.P. for ———shire, and his wife, were to dine that evening at the Manor.

‘And in consequence your soul in housekeeping cares is intent,’ he rejoined again lightly, but again with the searching glance which to his niece was so disconcerting.

Remembering an order he had to give at the stables, the squire strode off, taking a short cut through the back regions, where he encountered Ella, swallowed up in the ample folds of one of Mrs. Forrtreaves’ white aprons.

A thought struck the master of the house. ‘Elf, I want you to dine with us this evening, if you don’t mind wearing your Sunday dress.’

The little girl stood for a moment in silent surprise, then replied frankly, 'If you wish it, Uncle Vincent, I shall not mind a bit, only, you know, there is a dinner-party, and I shall be shy.'

'One of my guests may be shy, and that is why I want you. She's a young thing of eighteen, the bread-winner of a family once rich, now poor. I asked the child down here for a few days' rest and pleasure, and I found the want of an evening dress was a difficulty. Rather rashly, I suppose, I told her that clothes didn't matter. I forgot all about the dinner-party, and Miss Maine comes to-day.'

'I see,' said Ella, her face full of sympathetic interest in the brave young bread-winner. 'And you think she mightn't mind so much, if—if——'

'If she found she was dressed as well as my niece, Miss Elphinstone. Just so.'

'You always think of the kind things to do, Uncle Vincent,' said Ella. She was running off at the sound of Mrs. Forrtreaves' voice calling her, when she turned back to ask, 'May I put on clean frilling on my dress, Uncle Vincent?'

The squire lifted his eyebrows expressively. 'I mean to wear a clean collar, Elfinette.'

Still she lingered. 'I've heard mother say that a very useful thing to have, when you were grown up, was a black silk dress.'

'All right, child-elf. I'll keep the hint in mind.'

And Ella went off, satisfied in her mind that Miss Maine would have a black silk dress for a Christmas present, if not before.

That evening, some time after the dressing-bell had rung at Manor Coombe, Isobel Elphinstone, dressed in her plain well-worn cashmere, and carrying in her hand a bouquet of exquisite rosebuds, hiding with blushing coyness among their glossy dark leaves, knocked at Miss Maine's door. Entering in response to the quick 'Come in,' she went forward, and shook hands half shyly, half frankly, with a bright girlish figure in a plain, but ladylike, walking-dress.

'Miss Maine, I have brought you these to wear,' said Ella, holding out her flowers, which it had taken her a long time to arrange to her satisfaction. 'I am so glad your dress is dark, for the pale rosebuds will show beautifully against it.' And she laid them gently upon Miss Maine's otherwise unadorned bodice. 'I am not old enough to wear flowers in that way, my cousins say, so you must wear them for us both.'

The bouquet was accepted with a grateful expression of thanks, and the two went downstairs together. On reaching the full blaze of light in the hall, Ella could hear Miss Maine's quick-drawn breath of relief, as she glanced furtively from her plain tweed to the still plainer cashmere by her side. The evening, so dreaded by the young girl, proved after all wondrously pleasant; nor was she far wrong, when she afterwards told herself in the quiet of her own room, that for these hours of bright enjoyment she had Dr. Wilmott and his little niece to thank.

A week or two after Miss Maine's visit, Ella was on her way to the Home Farm one morning with a message which Mrs. Forrtreaves and the cook between

them had omitted to send the evening before. To prevent domestic friction, Ella had volunteered to go to the farm as soon as her music-lesson was over. The day was sultry, and Isobel, walking briskly, kept as close as might be under the shadow of the high hedges. She was humming to herself the simple air she had been playing on her violin that morning, thinking the while of the archery fête, and her chances of success in the great competition, when the sound of approaching wheels and voices, a novelty in the solitary road, made her turn her head to see who the riders might be.

Just appearing round a bend of the lane there came a small, old-fashioned basket carriage, with two occupants, the one an elderly woman, who was driving the pony, also elderly, if one might judge by its deliberate steadiness of gait, the other a little girl. As Ella stood on one side to let them pass, she saw that the girl, a sunny-faced little maiden rather younger than herself, had her foot propped up on a high hassock in front of her. Mutually interested, the two children took silent note of each other with the furtive keenness born of town life, until their eyes chanced to meet, when, with the same city-bred instinct, they blushed and looked away.

'Who can they be?' wondered Ella, as she once more proceeded on her way. She had not gone many steps, however, when she heard the voice of the little girl speaking in tones of distress. 'Oh, nurse, I've lost my mother's purse! I must have dropped it when we stopped to get the beauty spray

of blackberries for her. And the stamps we bought at the post-office were in it too! Oh, what shall we do?’

‘Decd, Miss Gwenneth, and I don’t know at all. We cannot turn in this narrow lane; and if we could, I dursn’t leave you alone with the pony, belike he might start off; and you can’t go back yourself, for you’ve walked far enough this morning already for your foot.’

After a moment’s shy hesitation, Ella retraced her steps to where the little carriage was standing in the lane. ‘I think I heard you say you had lost a purse,’ she said gently ‘May I look for it, while you wait here?’

The strangers thanked her warmly, and she started off. Presently, however, she remembered that she had not asked to be directed to the place where the stoppage had been made to gather the bramble spray, and she once more returned. But so soft was her step upon the grassy side-path that the occupants of the carriage, sitting with their backs turned to her, did not hear her approach.

‘Who can she be, nurse?’ asked the child, in a raised voice, as if speaking to one slightly deaf.

‘And for sure, dearie, I don’t know.’

‘There is a little girl staying at Manor Coombe, I know, but it cannot be she; for one of the pretty ladies who called yesterday said, when mother spoke of her—Isobel, that is her name—that she was a disagreeable girl, and very ungrateful to somebody, I forget who—somebody, the lady said, who spends

ever so much in keeping her and being kind to her. So I'm quite sure it cannot be Isobel, for this little girl looks so nice. Don't you think she does, nurse?'

Before the woman could reply, Ella, with her colour considerably heightened, stood at their side. The strangers, not dreaming that their talk had been overheard, attributed her heated appearance to her hurried walk along the dusty lane. They were vexed she had had the trouble of coming back; and when, some ten minutes later, she returned carrying the lost purse, the old nurse was profuse in her thanks, while her little charge, in shy silence, held out her hand, raising her blue eyes full of gratitude to Ella's face. The latter warmly returned the hand-clasp, then, moved by some impulse, held up her face for a kiss. That instant the stranger girl had leant forward, and thrown her arms round the other's neck. Not a word was spoken, and so they parted, child-like, never thinking of asking each other's names.

Ella watched the little vehicle until it disappeared round a sharp corner of the lane, and then, sitting down on the mossy edge of the bank, covered her face with her hands, and burst into a passion of tears. 'Oh, if I had only somebody to care for me!' she sobbed. 'Gwenneth's mother, I feel sure, loves her dearly, and doesn't grudge what it costs to keep her little girl. And yet I don't believe they are rich, for Gwenneth's hat looked no better than mine. Oh, why is there nobody to care for me? Oh, mother, mother!'

Thinking herself quite alone, she had spoken aloud in her distress, and the utter forlornness of her tone touched the heart of a stranger who approached the spot from a footpath through the field. It was a lady, still young, but with a widow's bonnet, and an indescribable look of quiet sadness which told a tale of recent sorrow and loss. For an instant she stood in hesitation, the next, she had mounted the bank, and laid her hand gently on the bowed head of the weeping child. Ella, dashing away her tears, looked up with startled eyes. Her extreme shyness usually made her shrink from exhibiting her feelings before strangers, and now her first instinct was to draw back timidly. But the new-comer would not notice the movement. Sitting down by the little girl's side, she put her arm round her. 'What is the matter, dear? Are you in trouble? Can I help you?'

The tender tones and the motherly touch were too much for Ella, and again the quick tears started. But the stranger waited with kind patience. 'Nothing is the matter,' stammered the little girl at last, 'only—only—only that I was wishing so much that somebody loved me, and wanted me. But I am of no use to anybody, and nobody wants me.'

'There you are wrong, little one. The great God has never made a useless thing yet. And it was He who made you.' Ella did not reply. The light had not returned to her pale tear-stained face. The lady drew her closer. 'Dear, you said no one wanted you. That is another mistake. God and Jesus both want you. God must have made you, to do some-

thing for Him that no one else could do so well. Don't you see that it must be so, or else, if He could have done without you, then He would not have created you?'

That was a new idea. Ella's eyes brightened. But they quickly clouded again. 'I don't think I can be useful to Him. I am not really good.'

'Have you ever asked Him to make you good?'

Ella looked up with a little wonder in her eyes. 'Oh yes, many times.'

'Then He is answering your prayers. You may be sure of that. He has promised that, in His own time and way, He will answer all our prayers. Don't you think we may trust Him to keep His word? And have you ever asked Him to allow you to be of some use to Him?'

'I don't know,' was the slow answer. 'But I think He knows how much I should like to.'

'Dear child, I feel sure He does. But turn the wish into a prayer, and then trust Him to answer it. And if you are of use to God, and you may be so without knowing or seeing how, then that is happiness enough, is it not, even though you may think you are of no use to any one else?'

Brighter and brighter shone the glad light in Ella's eyes. Her new friend watched her with silent interest. Presently, however, she rose up. 'I wish I could have stayed a little longer with you, dear, but I promised to meet my little girl; and if I am long in coming, she will fear something has happened.'

Ella raised her head, and the wistful longing in her face seemed to touch the other as if with pain. Very tenderly she passed her hand over the child's hair. 'My poor little girl!' she murmured, with a glance at Ella's black dress. 'I hardly need to ask, for something seems to tell me that you have no mother here. Am I right, dear?'

Isobel could not trust herself to speak. Her sorrowful shake of the head was answer enough.

'Then let me give you a mother's kiss. I have a little girl of my own, and I know how lonely she would be, were her mother taken away from her. But remember, little one, that it was when thinking of His lonely children that Jesus said, "I will not leave you orphans, I will come to you." Good-bye, dear. I think I know who you are. We shall meet again.'

She was gone, but her kiss, still more the comfort of the words she had spoken, remained as sunshine with Ella. Greatly cheered, she continued her way to the farm; but not until she had fulfilled her commission, and was on her way back through the dusty lanes, did it flash upon her that the sweet-faced widow lady could be little Gwenneth's mother. It was a pleasant idea, and she quite wondered at her own stupidity in not thinking of it at the first.

She was not likely to forget her new friends. Indeed, she thought of them almost constantly, and longed to see them again. But the days passed without her wish being gratified, although, with

patient persistence, she haunted the lane where she had met the pony-chaise, in the hope of like fortune again.

Meanwhile at Manor Coombe the all-absorbing interest was the approaching archery fête, which indeed should have come off ere now, but had been postponed to suit the convenience of several of the members of the club.

Finding that her uncle was determined to include Ella among the candidates at the match, Frances, who did not choose to have the public comment upon the shabbiness of her poor relation, sought out Mrs. Forrtreaves, a few days before the fête, to consult her about the making of a new but inexpensive dress for Isobel to wear on the great occasion.

'You haven't left us much time to see to it, Miss Wilmott. Maybe, as you are not a dressmaker yourself, you won't know that a cheap frock takes just as long to make as a dear one,' said the housekeeper, with the respectful irony admissible in a privileged old family piece. 'But, belike, clever young ladies like you have other things to think about before children's clothes. 'But you see that's quite in the line of a man like your uncle, and him and me have seen to everything for Miss Isobel, quite a long time ago. Come and see if you don't think we haven't just managed beautiful.'

She led the way to Ella's little room, and produced a lovely dress of soft grey material, set off by trimmings of a darker shade. The tasteful costume was

completed by a grey velvet hat with feathers to match.

‘Miss Isobel will look real nice in this, won’t she?’ complacently remarked Mrs. Forrtreaves, as she carefully smoothed one of the silky folds of the skirt. ‘And the colour and stuff isn’t none too fine for her, young though she be, for she’s been well learnt to take care of her clothes, poor lamb!’

There was a touch of pity in the speaker’s tone, which did not tend to lessen Frances’ jealous annoyance at this fresh proof of what she considered her uncle’s absurdly injudicious petting of her small cousin. Concealing her chagrin, however, she merely remarked in her coldest tone that the dress, she feared, was more pretty than useful, and took her departure.

Isobel had been very delighted and grateful to the doctor when she saw her pretty costume; and she, as well as the boys, was much excited about the archery match. But, if the truth must be told, she was less so than before the commencement of her music-lessons, and her once much-prized bow and arrows had been made to feel for some time back that they had a serious rival to their mistress’s affections in the person of her treasured companion, the violin. Her daily lessons were becoming more and more a fascination to Ella. Her teacher had not been long in verifying his prophecy with regard to his pupil, in whom he had found indeed the soul of a violinist. And with this discovery his patience—a grace by no means characteristic of the master of Manor

Coombe—proved in this case apparently unlimited. It must be said, however, that his pupil, in her anxiety to please her master, took endless pains to surmount the drudgery of her art, never once thinking of giving up, even when the initial difficulties, in their apparent insurmountableness, almost drove her to despair.

In her spare hours she would retire to an old lumber room at the top of an unused turret, where she would shut herself up with 'that diabolical little machine for grinding out caterwaulings,' as Lance, with his usual vicious elegance of speech, characterized her beloved musical instrument. Just at first, to do Lance justice, the sounds produced by the young violinist were not melodious, to put it mildly. Heartrending screechings and howlings echoed among the cobwebs, faded tapestry hangings, and worm-caten old furniture of the gloomy room, peopled, as it seemed to Ella's imagination, by the ghosts of her murdered symphonies. In spite of all her care in barricading the door, whose rusty latch was untrustworthy, there were times not a few when, by some unsuspected outlet, the harsh notes of her instrument would escape, and penetrate to the ears of the unthinking inhabitants below stairs, startling them into the belief that they were listening to the agonized cries of some tortured soul in the world of spirits. But out of all this discordance music was one day to come; so whispered the sober old denizens of the lumber room, nodding wisely to each other in dusty hopefulness. Ere long their endurance and Ella's patient perseverance were rewarded.

Sooner than she could have believed possible, she succeeded in taming the unruly spirit of her muse, who, humbly acknowledging her power, became her slave, and at the touch of her hand transformed the wild discordant voices of the angry echoes into soft breathings of melodious harmony.

CHAPTER VII

THE END OF A WALK

ONE morning, after performing various little offices for Mrs Forrtreaves, Ella rushed up to her garret, carefully barricaded her crazy, latchless door, and proceeded to tune her violin. She had struck but a few chords, however, when a thought occurring to her, she tenderly returned the instrument to its case, and running down the many flights of stairs to the ground-floor, hurried breathlessly from room to room in search of her cousin Frances, whom she found at last in the library, arranging with the coachman about a drive for the next day to the famous Valley of the Doones. When the man had gone, Miss Wilmott turned to Ella with an impatient, 'Well, child, what do you want?'

Timid Ella, who had always stood in awe of her imperious, haughty cousin, now almost repented the impulse that had brought her downstairs. But it was too late now, so she said what she had to say as quickly as might be.

'Cousin Frances, Charlie has just been telling me the names of the people who are coming for the picnic

to-morrow, but he says he is quite sure that the Maynards are not on your list. I don't know who they are, but I just remembered hearing Uncle Vincent speaking of them, and asking you to arrange about their joining the party. And I thought—I thought in case you had perhaps forgotten that I ought to come and remind you.'

Frances bit her lip with annoyance. She had forgotten, but the forgetfulness had been deliberate. She would have dismissed her little cousin with a cold reproach for meddling with what did not concern her, had it not been for the inopportune entrance of her sister, accompanied by a gay party armed with bows and arrows, who had come in search of Miss Wilmott for the archery practice.

'Why, what is the matter, Fan? You look ruffled. Are things not going straight for the fête? or is it the picnic?'

'The most crooked of things must perforce straighten themselves under the skilful generalship of our accomplished commander-in-chief,' said Captain Travers, bending his handsome head, as he glanced with undisguised admiration towards Miss Wilmott.

The young lady coloured slightly. She would have explained the cause of her vexation differently but for the disconcerting presence of her little cousin, whose honest eyes forced her to admit at least half of the truth. 'It is just because my uncle has trusted everything to me, that I am annoyed to find I have omitted to see to one trifling item of the arrangements for to-morrow. Some people of the name of Maynard have

lately taken lodgings in a cottage at Morecoombe. They are distant connexions, I believe, of my uncle's, and the fact that they belong to the class of the shabby-genteel, plentifully endowed with the pride of poverty, is more than a sufficient reason for the squire to have a great fancy for them. He asked me to write a note of invitation for the picnic to Mrs. Maynard and her daughter; but, if there are some fifty notes to be remembered, it is not so very wonderful that one should have been omitted. Well, it is too late now. The post has gone for the day, and there is no one who could be conveniently spared to act special messenger. It cannot be helped. And, after all, these people are no great loss. I can hardly fancy Mrs. and Miss Maynard proving an acquisition to our party.'

'In the circumstances the omission of the note seems a happy oversight,' remarked the captain with a light laugh, in which several of the party joined. 'All's well that ends well.'

'Cousin Frances, shall I take a message to Mrs. Maynard?' asked a timid voice at her side. 'If you tell me the name of the cottage, I shall be very pleased to go.'

Miss Wilmott turned sharply. She had forgotten the girl's presence. 'You have already shown yourself exceedingly forward, Ella,' she said coldly. 'Apparently you have not yet learnt how very unbecoming it is for young girls to interfere with what does not concern them. You may go now.'

With a hot flush crimsoning her cheeks, Ella walked quickly past the gay band of laughing, chattering

archers, and, escaping out of the room, sped up and up to her garret, where she shut and barricaded the rickety door with a violent bang, and seating herself among the cobwebs in a dark corner, gave way to an outburst of angry mortification. Her indignation rose to such a pitch that she vowed never again to try to help anybody; no, not even Uncle Vincent. It was at the best but a thankless task. But in time the dim solitude of the old lumber-room calmed her ruffled spirit, and it was not long before she had allowed the sweet notes of her violin to soothe her outraged feelings, and quiet her into complete forgetfulness of all recent disagreeableness.

But at luncheon the sight of her cousin Frances brought the scene of the morning's discomfiture only too vividly to her remembrance, and it was with considerable resentment that she listened to that young lady's confident assurance to the squire that all was in train for the next day's programme. Should she inform her uncle after lunch of what had passed in the morning? She was sorely tempted to do so, and thereby be revenged on Frances. But while she hesitated another thought came to her. She had it in her power to save the doctor from annoyance, and the Maynards, whoever they might be, from a disappointment, by taking a message to them, as she had offered to Frances to do. She would have the afternoon to herself, for the boys were going to fish, and she had declined to accompany them, as she wished to finish a book which her uncle had lent to her. Standing on the smooth lawn, now bathed in the glory

of the full September sunshine, she debated the point with herself. Frances had said these people lived in a cottage in the village of Morecoombe. There would be little difficulty in finding their lodging, and the walk, though a long one, was not farther than many a one she had taken with the boys for her own pleasure. But that last was just the point. This was not for her own pleasure, and, after all, why should she have to sacrifice herself because of Frances' horridness? Why? she impatiently asked herself again. To please her uncle was generally a motive strong enough to spur her on to do many a little thing not pleasant in itself. But in this case would he ever know what she had done? Most likely not. Of what use then to do it? Another answer came. But she was just then too irritated to look at the matter from that higher ground. 'It would please Jesus, and He would know, though Uncle Vincent might not;' so a voice whispered in her ear. But just then she would not heed. 'I shall read a chapter of my book first. There will be plenty of time to go to the village after that,' she said, trying to satisfy herself with this compromise, which committed her to nothing in particular.

Absorbed in the fascinating story of the troubles of beautiful Lorna Doone, she became utterly unconscious of the flight of time, and utterly forgetful of her half-formed purpose of going to Morecoombe. Lance's voice proved a somewhat rude awakening at last.

'I say, Cinder, are you deaf? The tea-bell's rung, and high time too. I'm hungrier than any wolf, and so's Char. After tea, you old Cinder, you've got to

tell me who the Doones were. Everybody knows the story except me, and what's the good of going to a robbers' den, if you don't know who the scoundrels were from Adam? And what's the good of being a girl, if you can't tell a fellow what you know?'

'I can tell you exactly what the Doones were like,' returned Ella, rising in haste from her seat on the still sunny lawn. 'They were your kind, when they were boys. If you had lived in their time, you would have grown up to be one of them, Lancelot Doone, the robber bully,' and with that she rushed off, leaving Lance, the robber, in a state of dumb confoundment.

'What's up with the elf?' demanded Charlie, looking after Isobel, who had passed him like a whirlwind into the house. 'What's she after?'

'If you mean that black witch who told me this very minute that she was first cousin to a murderous Doone, and then glared at me like an enraged harpy; if it's her you mean, I should say she's gone to stab somebody. But come on, Char, I'm aching all over for grub.'

Lance had conjectured truly. Ella had gone to stab some one, but that one was herself. Too late now, she realized that, by yielding to the impulse of self-indulgence, she had lost her opportunity of doing what she had felt all the time was the right thing for her to do. Her first impulse was to start off at once for the village, striving to make up by extra speed for what she had already lost in time. But as she threw on her hat and jacket she heard the clock strike a quarter to five, and saw that already the sun was

sinking rapidly in the brilliant west. The boys and she were to dine with their elders that evening, and dinner was to be unusually early, to suit the convenience of the squire, who had to drive into the country to see a sick person afterwards. It was not possible, even though she were to run all the way, to go and return from Morecoombe in time.

Slowly she took off her things, and tossing them on the bed, sat down moodily by the window to think. Secretly she was angry with herself, but not yet willing to admit that she had been selfish. But it was not long, however, before two or three deep sighs told that she had come to that point. And presently her head dropped in her hands. 'That is always the way,' she impatiently said to herself. 'I mean to do right, and nine times out of ten I just spoil everything, as I have done to-day. I wonder if I shall ever grow really good?' The desponding question ended with a prodigious sigh. Then came the brighter thought. 'But if I am not good, Jesus is, and He will help me to grow better. The kind lady said I was to ask Him, and then to believe that He was answering. He did want to help me this afternoon. If I had only listened when He whispered that I ought to go to Morecoombe! But I didn't, and now everything has gone all wrong, and I don't see how even God is going to put it right.'

Nevertheless, as soon as she had put the matter into her best Friend's hands, her burden felt greatly lightened.

She was still sitting by the open window, absently watching the glorious and ever-changing lights of the

autumn sunset, when, all at once, the thought came to her. 'Yes of course, I can do that,' she cried, starting to her feet. 'If I go to bed immediately after dinner, I can get up very early in the morning, and go to Morecoombe. We are not to start for the Doone Valley till half-past ten.'

After dinner Lance encountered Isobel emerging from the housekeeper's pantry with a glass of milk in one hand and a plate of biscuits in the other. 'Hollo! Miss Doone! at your robber tricks in broadish daylight!'

This reminded Ella of her last speech to the young gentleman. 'I think I was rather rude to you, Lance. I haven't a minute just now, but to-morrow, on the way to the Valley, I could tell you the story of——'

'Pooh!' interrupted Lancelot, with lofty magnanimity. 'I don't mind girls' tongues. At the best, girls are only apes in petticoats; their chatter is no loss.'

The next morning Isobel was up with the sun. The air was crisp and clear, as she flung open her window after she was dressed and ready for her milk and biscuits. The wisdom of telling some one of her intention to go to Morecoombe, so that her absence need not cause anxiety, did not once occur to her, as she set off blithely on her way, softly humming a tune to herself as she ran down the avenue, where the glittering dew sparkled on the smooth grass and shrubs on either side.

She had walked several times to Morecoombe, and knew the short-cut paths well. Unfortunately for her,

however, as she was climbing the stile leading into a meadow, she espied a quadruped planted right in the middle of the path, and glaring at her with fierce and threatening eyes. With one foot on the stile, poor city-bred Ella remained motionless, paralysed with terror at the sight of the ferocious-looking monster, which she felt certain to be a wild bull, already enraged at her appearance. Nearer and nearer came the terrible beast, and Isobel, too frightened to be cool and clear-sighted, failed to perceive that the object of her horror was but a handsome brindled cow of rather gigantic proportions. Precipitating herself over again to the safe side of the stile, she turned and fled, without even noticing the direction she had taken.

Out of breath, at last she stopped, and looked back. Old Bindle stood composedly chewing the cud, and contemplating her retreating figure with placid indifference. From this distance she could take a calmer view of the case, and the doubt did arise in her mind as to whether it was likely that a mad bull would be kept in a field open to the public by well-frequented stiles. Still, she was too uncertain about the quadruped to risk meeting him face to face, and preferred to make a long *détour* in order to regain the path beyond the meadow occupied by her enemy. Unluckily, in her nervous haste, she mistook the right turning. One field looked just like another, and she did not find out for some time that she was going astray. Presently she discovered her mistake, and with growing dismay looked round about her, with the hope of recognizing her whereabouts. To her relief she soon descried a

familiar landmark, and, guided by it, was once more on the direct road. Bravely she toiled on, but the way seemed interminable ; and long before she saw the white houses of Morecombe her head was throbbing painfully, partly from fatigue, partly from her fright over honest Brindle, and still more because of a nervous suspicion that she had lost time seriously through her foolish wanderings. Flushed and breathless, she reached at last the quiet village, nestling on the sunny slope of a thickly-wooded hill, which threw long deep shadows across the one straight street of the hamlet.

Making her way to the tiny post-office, she asked for Mrs. Maynard's lodgings, and was directed to a pretty rose-and-honeysuckle-covered cottage, which stood a little back from the road in a pleasant garden. But when, in answer to her knock, the door was opened, Isobel stood speechless, staring with dumb surprise at the motherly face of the woman little Gwenneth had called 'nurse.' And the next minute another figure was in the narrow passage, and the clear voice of Gwenneth herself, with a little scream of delight, was calling out, Mother, oh, mother, come ! Here is Elfinette ! I am sure it is Elfinette ! ' ,

CHAPTER VIII

THE PICNIC IN THE BEECH WOOD

BEFORE Isobel could awake from the stupefaction in which she found herself on her arrival at Rose Cottage, she was kissed and embraced, and dragged into a pretty little sitting-room, sweet with flowers, and pleasant with the homelike air which only the easy arrangement of books and work can give the family living-room. At the threshold Ella was met and welcomed by the young widow lady, her friend and comforter of a week ago, whom she now had no doubt in recognizing as Gwenneth's mother.

In the bewilderment of her surprise and gladness, Ella entirely forgot the errand on which she had come, and passively allowed herself to be put quietly to rest on the sofa in a shady corner of the room, without saying a word but a mechanical 'Thank you.'

In a kind of maze she murmured at last, looking at Gwenneth's mother, 'Then you are Mrs. Maynard!'

'Yes,' laughed Gwenneth, 'and I am Gwenneth Maynard, and you are Isobel Elphinstone, the doctor's Elfinette.'

'How do you know that?' asked Ella, her bewilderment deepening.

Mrs. Maynard smiled. 'I began to think you must be Elfinette the day I met you in the lane,' she answered, as she took off the girl's hat, that she might rest her throbbing head the better. 'Dr. Wilmott had spoken to me about you. When I said we should meet again, I had hoped it might be as soon as the next day, when I meant to call at Manor Coombe. But instead I took a cold, which has kept me indoors for nearly a week. And my foolish little Gwenneth was too shy to go to the Manor without me.'

'And yet, do you know, I was so very anxious to see you, Ella, that more than once I almost thought I must go by myself, and now that I have seen you again, I know the "almost" is sure to become "quite," if the motherly is not able to come too.'

Suddenly Isobel started to her feet. 'Oh, I am forgetting what I came for!' she exclaimed in distress. 'There is a great picnic to-day to the Doone Valley. Cousin Frances forgot to write a note to you to ask you to come. She thought there was no one who could be spared to take a message, and so I came to bring it. Oh, won't you please both go and get ready, for the picnic starts at half-past ten!' But while she spoke a vague misgiving crossed her mind. Even with the help of the basket-carriage, could they all three be quickly enough transported to Manor Coombe?

'My dear child,' said Mrs. Maynard regretfully, 'I am afraid you have lost your own chance of the

picnic through doing us a kindness. It is already long past ten o'clock. In less than a quarter of an hour the picnic party will be starting. Even with the pony-chaise you could not arrive at the Manor until long after the others had gone.'

A shadow fell on Isobel's face.

'Are you so very disappointed about the picnic, Ella? I am so sorry!' said the sympathetic Gwenneth.

'It isn't that,' answered Ella, her lip quivering. 'It is because I am too late, and now I am so vexed with myself. I always spoil things, and by my own fault, too. I've come too late with the message, and I might have been in time, for I could have come yesterday. Oh, I am sorry!' And unable any longer to resist the effects of fatigue and over-excitement she covered her face with her hands, and burst into tears.

This breakdown was beyond Gwenneth's powers either of comprehension or of consolation. She looked appealingly to her mother. To her little daughter's surprise, Mrs. Maynard, without attempting a word of cheering, left the room. Almost immediately, however, she returned carrying a little tray, which she placed on a small table, and drew to the sofa.

'Elfinette, I have two pieces of comfort for you. The first part you have got to eat and drink. This nice warm milk is just the thing to taste good along with nurse's famous home-made scones, which you must enjoy, or else you will disappoint her.'

Ella meant to protest that she was not hungry, but

somehow, without in the least knowing how, she found herself yielding to Mrs Maynard's gentle command so far as to take a draught of the delicious new milk. Satisfied with this as a beginning, Mrs. Maynard continued :

‘ Now for my second bit of comfort. Had you come yesterday, it is true Gwenneth and I should have had the pleasure of welcoming you to Rose Cottage a day sooner than we now do, but we should not have joined the picnic for all that. Your uncle knows that, on account of my cold, and for other reasons, we could not well go.’

Ella drew a long breath of relief, and venturing forthwith to taste the creamy white scones, found them delicious.

‘ But, oh, Ella, do you know that mothery and I are coming to the Manor the day after to-morrow for the archery fête?’ cried Gwenneth, unable to keep to herself one moment longer the all-important news which she was bursting to impart to her new friend. ‘ And we are going to stay all night And I want so much to see you shoot, for Dr. Wilmott says you are a famous archer, and he thinks you will get the prize. He wasn't to say one word to you about our coming, for it was to be a grand surprise. I like surprises, don't you?’

Ella looked up with a smile. ‘ I think I am having a great many surprises to-day.’ The sentence began with a ring of gladness, but there was a break at the end, as if some tears had suddenly got into her voice again, and she turned her face quickly away, not,

however, before her new friends saw that the brightness had gone out of it.

Gwenneth looked at her in half-grieved, half-puzzled silence, and Mrs Maynard, knowing no more than her little daughter what was wrong, put it all down to over-fatigue.

But it was not fatigue that had given the orphan girl the sudden pain at her heart just then. It was the thought that glad surprises would soon be all over for her. The brighter the present became, the darker looked the future in its dreary loneliness.

'Now then, what are we three going to do with our day?' asked Mrs Maynard in her bright way quietly slipping another scone on her visitor's plate. 'You see, it is but fair that we should entertain Elfinctte, since we are the cause of her losing the grand picnic to the Valley of the Doones. At the Manor they will know that we have kept you, dear. Suppose then that we have a picnic on our own account?'

Gwenneth clapped her hands, and Ella's face perceptibly brightened.

'Ah! wait a bit, Gwennie. You won't like the first part of my programme. When Ella has finished her breakfast, she is going to lie down on this sofa and sleep for an hour. Even an elf gets tired sometimes, you know, and needs to rest.' Gwenneth made a wry face. An hour was a long time. Her mother laughed. 'Why, Gwennie, have you forgotten already the hours and hours you had to lie on the sofa with your sprained ankle? Besides, while Ella sleeps, you and I have got to be busy helping nurse to make sand-

wiches. Well then, let us suppose that the elf is awake, the pony-chaise at the door, and the lunch-basket, work, and books packed under the seat, we three then start off for the fairy beech wood, where we shall spend the day, and eat our dinner among the ferns and wild flowers. Then, when we are tired of working, reading, talking, and listening to the birds' afternoon concert, we shall harness old Dobbin again to the chaise, and drive over to the Home Farm. You must know, Ella, that kind Mrs. Moberley was my nurse in the long ago, and I promised to bring my little girl and have tea at the farm, as soon as I could arrange for an afternoon.'

Again Gwenneth clapped her hands. 'Oh, how lovely! Ella, do be quick and get to sleep. See, I shall tuck you up; I know how. And, you know, if you should wake up before the end of the hour, it will be all the better.'

Isobel was much too excited to believe that in the circumstances such a thing as sleep was possible. But the pillow under her head was cool and soft, the stillness of the darkened room soothing, and when, with a little sigh of contentment, she shut her eyes, meaning to open them again the next minute, somehow or other she didn't remember to do it.

At the end of an hour, as there was no movement in the sitting-room, Gwenneth stole into the parlour on tiptoe. But at the sight of the pale, weary face resting so peacefully on the pillow, she stole away again to report to her mother that Elfinette looked very tired, and she didn't like even to cough except

just a very little, and that didn't wake her. But whether the little maiden's movements had been less noiseless than she had imagined, or whether the fairies had whispered to Ella in her dreams a reminder of the picnic in their beech woods, we do not know, but the next minute Gwenneth, standing at the open kitchen door, watching while Dobbin was being harnessed to the little carriage, found a pair of arms round her neck and knew that it was the elf.

That bright day in the fairy wood was one never to be forgotten by Isobel. On a sloping bank of moss, the fairies' drawing-room, as Gwenneth called it, they spread shawls and rugs, and enjoyed their simple luncheon of sandwiches, home-made cakes, and fruit, while they refreshed themselves with draughts of sparkling water from the queen fairy's magic fountain close by. Afterwards, while the other two worked, Ella read aloud a charming story from a book Mrs. Maynard had brought.

'When I have finished this little bit of hemming, that side will be done,' said Gwenneth, as Ella closed the book at the conclusion of the tale. 'Then we can go and gather autumn leaves. Mother makes the parlour look so pretty with them, when she has no other flowers.'

'Do you like to sew, Gwenneth?' asked Ella, as she watched her friend's careful, but rather laborious, stitching.

'No, not the least bit. But, you see, this handkerchief is going to be a present for Dr. Wilmott on his birthday. I have got the other two finished; this

makes the third and last. I am so glad. And, you see, I have to hem them very neatly, or else the doctor might think the sewing wasn't so well done as a sewing machine. Elfinette I love Dr. Wilmott very much. Do you ?'

Isobel did not speak. That is, her lips did not. But the eyes she raised to Gwenneth answered for her

'Ah, but you don't know how kind he has been to motherly and me,' continued the other. 'You know, I sprained my ankle badly a while ago now. Dr Wilmott heard I was not getting strong fast, and he wrote that he wanted some one to do him the great favour of living in Rose Cottage for a month or two. It was cheery for old Mrs. Brown to have lodgers, he said. And he gave us the pony carriage, so that I should have plenty of fresh air when I could not walk about much. Now my foot is getting well fast, but still he makes us keep the chaise, and he comes to see us often, and sends us game and all sorts of good things from the Manor, because, he says he can't persuade any of his own people to get sick and eat them up. He would have liked us to stay with him at the Manor, but he knows that there are too many people there just now for motherly to like it quite,' and with a quick movement the little daughter turned and laid her cheek softly against her mother's. And Ella, glancing furtively at the sweet face shaded by the widow's bonnet, could guess something of the story of sorrow to which Gwenneth's tender gesture had evident reference

For a minute or two there was silence. Then Mrs. Maynard, who had dropped her work, took it up again. The shadow which had for a moment clouded her sweet face was gone, and it was with a gentle smile that she stroked her little girl's curly brown head, which rested lovingly against her shoulder. As Ella watched the two she sighed, all unconscious that she had done so.

'Elfinette, what is the matter?' asked Mrs. Maynard softly.

The child started. She was shy just then of speaking what was in her heart. 'Oh, I was thinking about—about things,' she replied evasively. 'And one was that I wished I too could make a birthday present for Unck Vincent, but—' she hesitated, flushing a little—'but I have no money.'

Mrs. Maynard put down her knitting to consider the matter. 'Is there nothing you might do for him as a surprise for his birthday?' she asked at length.

'Once, put in Gwenneth, as she triumphantly broke off her thread after putting in her last stitch, 'once, when I was poor—too poor to buy anything for motherly at Christmas, I tidied up the drawers of her wardrobe for her as a surprise. She was pleased, for she does not like tidying up nowadays any more than when she was a little girl,' concluded Gwenneth, with an arch look.

An eager longing had been stealing over Ella's face. Now she suddenly started to her feet, the colour coming into her cheeks, which had been pale enough before. 'Oh, how would this do?' she cried. 'The

other day Uncle Vincent got a letter from some professor, a man who has to do with the British Association, I think. He wanted my uncle to tell him something about a plant that grows in India. Uncle Vincent told Cousin Frances that long ago he sent a bit of that very plant pressed in a letter to his mother in England. He thought very likely she kept it, for she kept all his letters, and everybody's else's too. He said he had a whole chest full of old letters, but they were all in confusion. It would take ever so long to look them over, and besides, he should not like to do it. I think he meant that it would put him so much in mind of his mother. But, don't you think, perhaps he might be glad if somebody else would search for the letter for him ?'

'If you think that your uncle would be pleased that you should look, it seems just the very thing, dear. But I am afraid it will be a more tedious task than you imagine.'

• Isobel sank down again on the bank, leaning her head against a tree trunk. There was a smile on her face, though her head was throbbing again. 'I should not mind that,' she said simply. 'I love Uncle Vincent very much.'

Gwenneth looked at her. 'I think,' she said affectionately, 'I think Dr. Wilmott must love *you* very much.'

Ella shook her head. 'He is very, very kind to me ; but you know I am not clever, nor pretty, nor even good'

Her friend impulsively put her arm round her neck.

‘I have known you only for a little while, and I love you dearly already, and I hadn’t a minute of time to think whether you were pretty or wise. Did you about me?’

‘Oh yes,’ naively replied the other. ‘I knew the moment I saw you that you were both.’

‘Just when I had been clever enough to lose mother’s purse!’ cried Gwenneth, with a merry laugh, in which she tried, but not very successfully, to make her friend join. Tears seemed very near the surface with Isobel that day, they came now with such a rush that she was forced to bury her head in her hands.

‘Oh,’ she said brokenly, ‘it is so wonderful, so sweet, that you should be so kind to me, and care for me; but—but that only makes it all the harder, because—because, you know, it cannot last.’

‘Cannot last, dear? What do you mean?’ gently asked Mrs. Maynard.

‘Very soon now I shall have to leave dear Manor Coombe, and go back to London and Aunt Florence.’

‘Are you not happy there. Ella?’ asked Gwenneth, a mixture of dismay and pity in her voice.

Isobel shook her head.

‘Drawing her closer, Mrs. Maynard said tenderly, ‘Elfinette, you would rather be just where God wants you to stay, would you not?’

‘Oh, but that is just what is troubling me,’ cried the girl. ‘When we first came here, I used to ask God every day to let us stay longer and longer, for it was all so beautiful, and everybody was so kind. And now that there is you and Gwennie, I seem to want more

and more to stay on. But lately I have not been quite sure whether I ought any longer to go on praying like that. Perhaps it may seem to God as if I were not grateful for the happy, happy time He has let me have all the long summer.'

Mrs. Maynard took the troubled face between her hands. 'Little one, you need not be afraid. It is true we often make mistakes in our prayers, because we know no better: but our Father would rather we made mistakes than that we should stop praying. He likes us to tell Him all that is in our hearts, and if we ask something that He knows would not be good for us, then He will make it all right by giving us something better even than what we longed so much for.'

A burden which had been weighing on Ella for some time past now rolled itself off, and her sigh of relief was even more eloquent than her grateful 'Thank you.'

But on Gwenneth's heart quite a different load was pressing. As she thought of that home in London, where all was not bright, her sunny face grew graver and graver. Little Gwen's own home was not in money's value a wealthy one, but it possessed what money could not buy—love, and peace and gladness—and it hurt her sympathetic little soul to think that while she was so rich her new friend was so poor. 'If I keep on thinking about it,' she said to herself, winking hard, 'I shall cry, and Elfinette would see, and I want the day to be all bright for her. I must go away for a minute. I shan't make the brook damp if I stay beside him for a bit.' And suiting the action to the word, she sprang up, seizing the empty luncheon



basket. 'I am going to get some autumn leaves for you, mothery. I don't believe you want to come, Elf. You look as if your head ached still. You stay with mothery. I shall not be gone long.'

Mrs. Maynard laid aside her work, and putting her arm round Ella, drew her head to rest upon her arm. 'I think your eyes, Gwennie, have grown sharp through noticing when my bad headaches come on,' she said, smiling brightly at her little daughter, who waved her basket for good-bye. while she ran off as fast as her lame foot would allow, taking care not to wipe two tears away until she was out of sight among the trees. 'Mother will comfort up Ella; she always knows how,' was her self-consoling thought.

Just at first, however, there was little talk between the two left sitting on the mossy bank. But to the orphan girl the soft touch of Mrs. Maynard's hand upon her head was perhaps more comforting than any words could have been, and for a time she was content to shut her eyes, and let her throbbing temples feel the magic soothing of that gentle hand.

Presently, as the pain subsided, there came to her mind another matter about which she wished to talk to Gwenneth's mother. 'Mrs. Maynard, may I ask you something?'

'Anything you like, dear.'

Half raising herself up, so that she could see her friend's face, Isobel in a low troubled voice said, 'Uncle Vincent does not believe that God loves him.'

‘Yes, Elfinette, I know it,’ was the sorrowful answer, as Ella paused, uncertain how to proceed.

‘He thinks that only the great and the wise and the good can be chosen by God to belong to Him. I said I thought that it didn’t matter what we were; that God took us just as we were, to belong to Him. Uncle Vincent said that a real king should allow none to be about him except nobles, who should be wise and great enough and good enough to be his friends, and he said that surely it must be like that with the King of kings.’

‘Elfinette, I think your uncle was right.’

Ella’s expression changed to one of surprised dismay. ‘But I told Uncle Vincent that I was neither clever nor great nor even good, but that I knew I belonged to God.’

‘And you think that if Dr. Wilmott is right, then you must be wrong? What if you were both right? Do you remember Christ’s parable of the marriage feast of the king? You remember about the man who dared to come into the king’s presence without the wedding garment? Your uncle is right. The King of kings, when His great feast is ready, will not admit to the banqueting-hall guests who are unworthy to be in His great and holy presence. Into His kingdom none may enter that defileth.

‘But, thank God, Matthew’s sad story of the rejected guest is not the only one we have. If you turn to the Book of the Prophet Zechariah, you will find a picture as bright as the other is dark. There you will see a poor sinner, Joshua was his name, having

his own filthy garments taken away, and his miserable rags replaced by the king's royal apparel, the beautiful dress which you know is the robe of Christ's righteousness.

'In this world of ours, when there is a royal wedding, the guests invited to the ceremony have to provide themselves with a dress suitable for the great occasion. But with the King of kings it is quite different. He Himself furnishes each one of His guests with a wedding garment. The poorest and the meanest, who comes in the name of Jesus, will be accepted by the King for His Son's sake, and presented with that robe which has been paid for by the precious blood of Christ.'

In her favourite attitude for thinking, with her chin on her hand, Isobel sat for some little time in silence. 'Mrs. Maynard,' she said at length, 'I told Uncle Vincent that I thought he must be wrong. May I tell him now that he was quite right, and show him the two Bible pictures?'

'Do, my dear. And ask our Father to help your uncle, when he reads, to understand.' And through the mind of the widow there passed the thought, 'Where I and others have failed, is it to be God's will that a little child shall lead him?' Aloud she said, 'Why should we wait to ask God about this? Let us speak to Him now.' And kneeling down with Ella on the soft bank, she laid before their Heavenly Father, not only their trouble about Dr. Wilmott, but also Ella's longings and fears about the future, which looked so dark to her

Ten minutes later Gwennie, laden with sprays of russet and crimson-tinted leaves, appeared in sight. As she threw down her burden at her mother's feet, she snatched a furtive glance at Isobel's bright face, then smiled to herself. 'I knew,' she whispered triumphantly, 'I knew motherly would comfort her.'

'What is that you are saying, Gwennie?'

She shook her head sagely. 'Only telling Gwenneth Maynard that she is a very wise person. I have to tell her this sometimes, for she is so stupid she always forgets the most important things.'

'Then I suppose this wise piece of stupidity has forgotten that we three are going out to tea this afternoon, and that it is high time we were setting off,' remarked her mother, proceeding to fold up her work.

'No, indeed she hasn't,' returned Gwenneth, springing up to help Mrs Maynard and Ella to gather together their belongings.

They all made themselves very merry over the harnessing of old Dobbin to the little chaise, which they felt sure he took great pleasure in drawing along the lanes, providing his passengers had the good taste to drive exceedingly slowly, so as to afford him leisure to admire the beauties of his native Devonshire.

In due time he brought his party safely to the door of the farm-house, a substantial two-storied building standing in a large well-kept garden, and surrounded by orderly farm-buildings which it seemed to overlook with the air of protective pride. At the sound of the

wheels in the court, Mrs. Moberley came hurrying to the front door, which she threw open with a cry of delighted welcome at the sight of her visitors.

When the greetings were over, the two girls went off on a grand tour of inspection about the farm, where they found much to fascinate them. There was the dairy to see, where in brass-covered coppers the rich Devonshire cream was setting; the eggs to gather; the cows to stroke; and the animal population in general to admire. Mrs. Maynard, meanwhile, had been proudly ushered into a pretty oak-panelled parlour by Mrs. Moberley, who speedily set on foot preparations for a grand tea in honour of her guests.

Half an hour later the girls were summoned indoors. They found it hard to obey, and were only moved to do so at last out of consideration for their kind hostess, whose hospitable soul was longing to have her bountiful spread appreciated.

The trio were doing their best to gratify her in this respect, when the sound of horse's feet drew curious Gwenneth to the window. She was too late. The rider had dismounted, and was talking to Mrs. Moberley; but the next instant the parlour door opened, and in walked Dr. Wilmott. Gwenneth joyfully sprang to meet him, while Mrs. Maynard held out her hand with a delighted, 'Vincent, this is an unexpected pleasure!'

'To me it certainly is,' rejoined the squire, greeting her with a smile as bright as her own, and patting Gwennie's hand. 'The business that brought me round by the farm on my way home has been

unexpectedly turned into pleasure, and I find myself in time for a tea-party.'

Poor Isobel meanwhile had shrunk into the background with a sudden consciousness that she would be called upon to give an account of herself, and she was oppressed with a shamefaced dread of how the doctor would take it

He soon turned to her with an air of mock fierceness. 'And so, you runaway, I have found you! You would not have managed this escapade, you cunning elf, if I had been at the start this morning. But I had ridden on ahead of the carriages to see Porter's old mother, and, luckily for you, did not discover, until I had joined the others halfway to the Doone Valley, that Miss Elphinstone was not of the party. And no one could clear up the mystery. My nieces believed she had preferred to remain at home, but Master Lancelot informed me that the Cinder was on the galavant. He had seen her set off by herself at screech of dawn to the back of beyond, whence she was not likely, he considered, ever to return. And now, mademoiselle, what have you to say for yourself? I must admit that you might have absconded with worse company, but that does not explain your remarkably independent conduct, Miss Elphinstone.'

In spite of the twinkle in the doctor's eye, Ella found his mocking tone disconcerting, and it was very lamely indeed that she hurriedly made her explanation. 'I wanted to tell them that you would like them to come to the picnic. I might have brought the message in time yesterday, but I was

selfish, and didn't. This morning I got up early, but I lost ever so much time, because I was frightened at a bull that was a cow.'

When, with Mrs Maynard's help, these disconnected fragments of information were pieced together into a more lucid statement of facts, Dr. Wilmott, with comical formality, bowed to Ella, and told her the explanation was satisfactory on the whole, and did her credit.

Isobel drew a quick breath of relief, but, having no words ready, shyly held out her hand instead.

Dr. Wilmott laid down the cup of tea with which Mrs. Maynard had just provided him, and silently took the little hand in both of his. They had often a strange way these two, the elderly man and the child, of understanding one another without the help of speech. Flushing a little, she came nearer, and immediately he put his arm round her, and drew her close.

Well, Vincent, have you had a pleasant time among the ghosts of the Doones?' asked Mrs. Maynard, taking the doctor's cup to refill it.

Whereupon he gave them an amusing account of the day's expedition, describing the wrath of several of the party against Mr. Blackmore's famous valley, which they pronounced an infamous take-in. 'Some day,' said the doctor, 'we four shall set off by ourselves, and I'll be bound that the elf and Gwen at least will, quick enough, people the quiet glen with fierce robber Doones peeping at them from behind every old tree-trunk.'

'Some day,' said Isobel to herself, 'some day I shall not be here at all.'

'Well, I know one thing,' emphatically struck in Gwenneth, 'and that is, that we have had a splendidly delightful day. Your Eifinette and I are great friends, Dr. Wilmott. You see, we know each other quite well now, for we've talked and talked——'

'I am afraid my coming must have proved an interruption. I am sorry,' said the squire penitently 'Pray begin again where you left off.'

'Oh, when you came in, strangely enough, we were talking about you,' composedly returned Gwen. 'I was saying to Ella that I did not wonder in the least that she was glad she was your niece. But she said she wasn't, and she was sorry.' The extreme haziness of this speech did not strike the speaker as it did her audience. She knew what she meant to say, if they did not. 'That boy, Lancelot Wilmott, has told her she isn't a niece at all, but only a cousin twice removed. And so she is sorry, for she would rather be a near relation than only a removed one. For, you see, she has learnt to love you just as much as if you were a real uncle. She can't help it, she says, and I told her I didn't believe she need try.'

Whereupon the doctor turned upon his cousin-twice-removed, whose checks had been crimsoning with painful embarrassment throughout the delivery of this outspoken speech of Gwenneth's. 'Miss Elphinstone, I beg to say that if you dare to remove me to a distance, you will do so at the risk of incurring my most serious displeasure. And now,' he

continued, helping himself to a piece of home-made cake from the plate which Gwennie handed to him, 'now let us settle this vexed question of these removals once for all. Lifinette, I was your mother's cousin; therefore it is plain I cannot be yours as well; therefore, again, what else can I be but your uncle, unless you can prove by my grey hair that I am your grandfather?'

And in the laugh that greeted the doctor's logic, Isobel, to her relief, recovered from the discomposure which had dyed her cheeks so uncomfortably.

A little later, and the fading light warned the party lingering round the pleasant tea-table that it was time to break up; and Dr. Wilmott, anxious about the evening air for Mrs. Maynard, hurried off to see to the harnessing of old Dobbin, and to borrow the farmer's gig for himself and Ella.

'We hardly need to say good-bye,' cried Gwennie, as she gaily took her seat beside her mother in the chaise; 'the day after to-morrow will be here so soon!'

The drive to Manor Coombe was not a long one, but it afforded Isobel the opportunity she wanted, to ask the doctor if he would allow her to look for the lost letter containing the Indian grass.

'You may do as you like, child,' he said, with a smile that showed him not at all displeased with her request. 'I know you now for a careful, quick-fingered elf. But you will find the search a hopeless one, and you will soon tire of it. I think even the patience of the renowned patriarch would not hold

out long over that great chest of old letters.' He stooped to wrap the rug more closely about her, for the evenings were beginning to turn chilly. 'And so you actually love this old, crusty, curmudgeon of an uncle, do you. eh, child-elf?' he asked, eyeing her curiously, with a sidelong glance.

'No, not that one,' she replied, with a grave shake of her head: 'I don't know him. The one I care for is my cousin-twice-removed, my kind, kind uncle, Vincent Wilmott, Esquire, of Manor Coombe.'

CHAPTER IX

THE ARCHERY FÊTE

AFTER all, Isobel did not win the prize at the archery match. On the morning of the eventful day she had awakened with hopes as bright as the sunshine that poured into her room, and promised well for the weather about which everybody had been so anxious the evening before. And her one thought, as she put on her pretty grey dress, was that she must do her very best to win the prize for her Uncle Vincent's sake, for he had been so kind in teaching the boys and her throughout all these past weeks.

Later in the day her spirits were sobered by an aggravated attack of her chronic malady, shyness, which came on at the sight of the guests, who began to arrive in gay crowds, that taxed to the uttermost even Frances' apparently unlimited powers as hostess. With the arrival of Mrs. Maynard and Gwenneth, however, Ella's timidity left her. She forgot herself in seeing to their comfort and enjoyment, a task with which, to her delight, her uncle had specially charged her. The match was not to come off till after

luncheon, and the two girls, leaving Mrs. Maynard pleasantly engaged in conversation with one of the guests, who proved to be an old school friend, rambled off by themselves on a tour about the grounds and gardens.

The sound of a bugle summoned them to the archery field, where, in a marquee, they found the guests assembling for luncheon, a feast which owed its elegance to Frances and its substantiality to the squire. Shortly after the conclusion of the repast, the bugle-call again gathered the company together. The archery contest was about to begin, and Charlie, running up with Ella's bow and arrows, hurried her off to join the other juvenile competitors, who, according to the programme, were to have the first innings.

'Who is that neat little piece in grey, the child with the sweet face peeping shyly from under her shady hat? She is nearly as dark as a gipsy, and she holds her bow with a grace and skill that promises well for her success.'

The speaker, one of Frances' fashionable acquaintances, had thought to please the squire's proud niece by paying a compliment to the little girl, who had already been pointed out to her as Miss Wilmott's cousin, but whom she now affected not to recognize.

At that moment the band abruptly stopped. The bugle, awaking the distant echoes with its clear double notes, gave the signal for the match to begin. Unconscious, or more likely indifferent to the fact that, in the sudden hush of sounds, her voice could be plainly heard by Ella, who, as the youngest of the

junior archers, had advanced to her place, and was already lifting her bow to aim, Frances coldly replied, 'That is my cousin, Isobel Elphinstone. On closer acquaintance you would not find her sweet, nor indeed attractive in any sense of the word. But distance lends enchantment, as we all know.'

'Ah! pardon my shortsighted mistake,' said the other young lady, adjusting her eyeglass with the sense that she had made a decided slip with the handsome Miss Wilmott, who, if all reports were true, was to be the squire of Manor Coombe's adopted daughter.

The signal had been given that all was ready. Every eye was turned on Ella. But she did not shoot. Her heightened colour and disturbed look were attributed to nervousness. None guessed the storm of angry passion that raged within that slight, girlish form standing there erect and strangely still. Every word of Frances' cold, cutting speech had reached her ears, and her throat swelled almost to suffocation with the hurt feelings that threatened to overmaster her. 'How can she say such cruel things?' she asked herself with passionate indignation. Then, as resentment rose still higher, there came the thirst for revenge. Grasping her bow, she raised it, muttering, 'I'll show her that my shooting is as least as attractive as hers, yes, better than hers at her best!'

But she had not calculated on the effect of the inward tempest, nor on her own inability to stay it. In vain she tried to take her usual steady aim. Her fingers trembled as she drew the bow-string, hot tears

blinded her eyes, so that she could not clearly see the target, and when, in a kind of desperation, she tried to steady herself by planting her feet more firmly on the ground, to her dismay it seemed to give way beneath her. Three times she drew her bow, and three times, to the consternation of the doctor and Charlie, she shot an arrow as utterly wide of the mark as any random shot could well be. A murmur, half amused, half compassionate, from the crowd of onlookers announced her utter failure. One swift glance at Dr. Wilmott's disappointed face, and Ella had fled to where, in the shelter of the marquise, sat Mrs Maynard. Flinging her bow on the ground, the girl dropped beside it, and buried her head in her friend's lap with a sob.

Charlie and Gwenneth came hurrying up. 'Oh, mothery, was it not hard for poor Elfinette? She was so frightened, she couldn't shoot well. Charlie says he could see her hands shake.'

'It wasn't that. It wasn't that at all!' interrupted Isobel in a broken voice. Nothing more could be said, for just then a band of archers came crowding round, and Mrs. Maynard could only put her arm round the distressed child, and try to shield her from the notice of the bystanders. But, on Charlie's name being called, she raised her tear-stained face. 'Oh, Charlie, try and win, for Uncle Vincent's sake!'

In a few minutes Charlie was back triumphant. 'It's all right, I've done the best of the boys, and even Lance not so disreputably as you might have supposed. And listen, Cinder, we've all got three

rounds more, you know, so that gives you another chance. Cheer up. See, it's you they are calling, now.'

'You will do better this time. I've asked Jesus to help you,' whispered Gwenneth, as she kissed her friend encouragingly.

Simple Gwennie had been all her short life in the habit of taking everything, even the smallest of her joys and difficulties, to God, just as naturally as to her mother. But it was a new thought to the orphan Isobel. Her cheeks flushed. Might she ask help for herself? Or did the anger in her heart make it impossible? Almost impatiently the marksman was calling for Miss Elphinstone, but still she stood in the tent, as if she did not hear, both hands over her face.

'If you would rather not shoot again, Elfinette, you need not,' whispered Dr. Wilmott, who had come up unperceived.

Isobel unclasped her hands. 'Thank you, Uncle Vincent, but I should like to try again,' she said quietly; and taking her bow and arrows from Gwenneth with a look of grateful thanks, she moved quickly to the front.

At the sight of her pale face the onlookers, confirmed in their opinion of her nervousness, watched her sympathetically, and vociferously applauded her first effort, which, although by no means up to the mark of her ordinary shooting on practising days, was such a vast improvement upon her former performance as to warrant the sudden outburst of

enthusiastic praise. But, above the encouraging cries of the crowd, Ella heard a voice at her elbow, 'Well done, Elfinette! Courage!' A slight flush relieved the paleness of her cheeks, and her eyes brightened. With slow deliberation she took aim for her second arrow. Away it sped straight to the bull's eye, and as it quivered in the centre of the inner ring a louder cheer broke from the excited bystanders, which had hardly ceased when Isobel's third arrow sped from the bow, and going straight to the mark, lodged itself as close as might be beside its fellow in the centre of the target.

'Bravo! Hooray! Hooray!' cried Charlie, frantically waving his cap. 'These two shots must for certain sure toss the first three overboard!' he cried exultingly; for secretly both he and Lance had been hoping the credit of the Robin Hood trio would be sustained by the Cinder coming off as the crack shot of the field.

Ella's breath came quick. 'Would the prize judges say so?' she anxiously asked herself. 'Oh, if only they would, for Uncle Vincent's sake!'

All too soon her hopes were dashed to the ground. Charlie, who had raced off to the marksman's tent, returned wrathful and disconsolate. 'It's no good! The fellow declares your first innings bowled you right over. I do believe the old curmudgeon thinks your last two were flukes. There never was such a thundering ass since Goliath! I'll get Uncle Vincent to tell him so.'

Dr. Wilmott, however, declined to interfere with

the decision of the lawful authorities. 'I must not seem to favour my niece,' he said, with an emphasis, on the last word that annoyed Frances not a little. Finally it was agreed that the juniors, like their elders, should have a third round, in order to decide more fairly the present unequal contest. But, to the chagrin of Charlie and Gwenneth, Ella was not forthcoming when the call came once more for Miss Elphinstone. In all directions they hunted for her, sending her name over wood and dale with such earnestness that the sympathetic echoes took up their cause, and added their plaintive voice to the general cry. But all in vain; and at last, for the senior archers were growing impatient, the search had to be abandoned.

An hour later, and the archery match was over; the prizes were awarded to the successful competitors, and Charlie was exhibiting his fine skates to Gwenneth and her mother with a satisfaction that was somewhat damped by his overhearing the exultation of the young girl who was the proud possessor of the golden arrow brooch.

'Wherever can Ella be?' sighed Gwenneth for the twentieth time. 'She's been gone so long!'

So too thought Dr. Wilmott. And presently, seeing that his guests were fully and pleasantly occupied in the refreshment tent, where afternoon tea was now proceeding, he went off in search of the truant. Guided in the right direction by a stable boy, who had seen Miss Elphinstone going down towards the beach, he soon discovered the runaway

hidden in the dark recess of a tiny rockbound cove, away from the sight and sound of everything, save that of the angry breakers dashing themselves in wild clouds of spray and foam, against the crags. She was sitting on the white shingle, her back against a friendly stone, her eyes fixed dreamily on the restless waves, her whole figure the picture of woe-begone dejection.

'Chagrin over the day's failure, and disappointment over the loss of the prize,' so the doctor read, but not quite correctly, the grave lines on the child's brow, as he drew near and lightly touched her on the shoulder.

She started, then, on seeing who it was, sprang to her feet with flushing cheeks. 'Oh, Uncle Vincent, I am so very, very sorry!' she faltered. 'You must be so disappointed with me, for —'

'The biggest disappointment surely must be your own, Miss Robin Hood,' lightly returned the squire. 'And if you had not been the most blundering of elves, you would not have gone off and hid yourself, and so lost your last chance of winning the prize of the golden arrow after all.'

Though not comprehending in the least this, the last of her enormities, Lilla meekly accepted the accusation. 'I am never anything but stupid,' she murmured penitently. 'But, indeed, I did not care about the brooch so much for myself, though of course I should have liked to have it. What I cared most for was that, after you had been so kind in teaching me, I had just spoilt it all by doing so badly.'

'Pooh!' again returned the doctor, secretly touched, however, to discover what had been the chief ground

of her trouble. 'Nobody could blame you for being nervous at first. You did famously afterwards.'

Again the colour mounted to Isobel's cheeks. 'But that is the worst of all,' she cried in distress. 'It wasn't that I was frightened half so much as that I was in such a passion I couldn't see or keep my hands steady.' The doctor looked inquiringly, and she explained as best she could. 'Somebody said something unkind; I heard her, and it made me furious. Uncle Vincent, isn't it hard not to be angry when people say unkind things about one?'

'I hardly know,' drily returned the doctor. 'I have seldom tried the experiment. It is a waste of time, in my opinion, to attempt impossibilities.' The girl looked at him in puzzled wonder. 'We can't help getting angry, child. Don't worry yourself.'

Ella shook her head. This had not been Mrs. Elphinstone's teaching to her little daughter. 'I suppose I couldn't help being hurt, and of course I know I couldn't have stopped of *myself* from growing angrier and angrier, but——'

'But what?' asked the squire as she stopped, with a shy unwillingness to speak out her thought.

'Oh, I meant that if I had asked Jesus, *He* would have helped me to feel better. But I didn't think of that, and so I lost the prize, and disappointed you, Uncle Vincent. And then I was miserable, and ran away. And I know you must soon get tired of being kind to me. I seem to be always making mistakes and doing wrong things!' she ended dolefully.

'Pooh!' for the third time reiterated the doctor.

'I think that is why I like *you*, Elfinette. You don't set yourself up as one of these self-adoring prigs of perfection that mustn't be found fault with, and—' He stopped short, somewhat startled at the effect of his words.

Isobel had risen to her feet, her eyes burning with suppressed excitement. 'Do you mean,' she stammered, 'oh, Uncle Vincent, do you mean that you really like me a little?'

Dr. Wilmott looked at the moved little figure standing before him; and taking her clasped hands in both of his, to still their trembling, he said quietly, 'Elfinette, I like you very much.'

Her lip quivered. Snatching away her hands, she covered her face with them. 'It is too good!' she cried with a half sob. 'I have had nobody to care for me like that since mother died. I wondered if perhaps some day Mrs Maynard could love me a little, but that *you* should, Uncle Vincent—oh, that is best of all!'

Taking forcible possession of her hands again, and drawing her down beside him, the doctor waited till she was herself once more, then he asked gently, 'Why should it make you so glad, little one, that your old uncle should love you?'

'I think,' she softly answered, 'I think it is because I love you so very much. I could not help that, you know, because you have been so kind to me.'

The squire laughed, but his laugh sounded a little unsteady. 'Well then, let us shake hands over it,' and he held out his for her to take. 'We are to consider

‘It a thing settled between uncle and niece that we love each other, you and I, and that it is to be for all time coming, eh, Elfinette?’

Very gravely she took the outstretched hand, but, though she said never a word, there was a light in her eyes that spoke her glad assent to the compact.

A good number of the guests who had taken part in the archery tournament remained to dine at the Manor, the junior members of the club, to their great delight, being included in the invitation; and their host took special pains to make the evening’s entertainment of a kind to suit the tastes of the younger portion of the company.

‘We can act the ancient fossil for at least 360 days in the year, if we like,’ he remarked to an old scientific friend of his, who was gracing the occasion with a somewhat condescending patronage. ‘And if we can manage to snatch an odd day or two for playing at being young again, Max, so much the better, I am inclined to believe, for the future preservation of the fossils.’

The games set on foot by Dr. Wilmott and his able seconders, the Wilmott Brothers, proved fascinating to old and young alike, apparently; and it was only when the players had to confess themselves out of breath with exercise and laughter, that a call was made for music to vary the performance.

The scientific fossil, obstinately preferring a literal old age to a make-believe youth, had retired to the library, where he was soon buried in a ponderous tome he had dragged down from one of the highest shelves.

Passing the half-open door on an errand for her uncle, Isobel saw the professor sitting alone, and, as she thought, forlorn. 'Uncle Vincent said to Gwenneth and Charlie and me that we were to try and make all the people enjoy themselves. I suppose "people" means Dr. Schultz,' she said to herself. 'But,' this with a doubtful glance at the somewhat stern features of the old gentleman, 'I don't know what I could do; I am half afraid of him, besides.'

While she hesitated, peeping timidly into the silent room, Dr. Schultz laid down his great volume, rubbed his eyes, and leant back in his chair with a little sigh, which changed into an exclamation of impatient dismay, as his elbow knocked off the table a box, from which a set of ivory chessmen escaped and scattered themselves in all directions.

Instantly Ella was by his side, and with a shy 'I will find them,' knelt down, and picked up the pieces. As she did so, a thought came to her. 'Dr. Schultz, perhaps you are tired reading, and it's lonely for you here all by yourself. I can play chess a little; my mother taught me.'

The fossil looked at her curiously. 'You know you would rather be with the others. Tell the truth now,' he added a little sternly; for, although he invariably repudiated for himself the ancient assertion that all men liars be, he had no hesitation in affirming that it held good as regards women and children.

'Yes, I should,' replied the girl, blushing rosy red, as she looked him straight in the face with her honest eyes. 'But I couldn't enjoy myself if I went now, for

'I should be uncomfortable, thinking of you here all alone.'

The professor laughed his short, dry laugh, but he allowed himself to be entertained. It was many years since he had played a game of chess. He had wellnigh forgotten how to set the pieces, or how to move them when set. Ella, who had been well taught by her mother, and had kept herself in practice with Charlie, was a remarkably good player for a girl of her age, and she found herself taking the lead. Ere long, however, the professor became interested, the more so, indeed, as he found himself getting bewildered and entangled in the intricacies of a game, which bid fair to tax his skill to the utmost.

Now and again strains of music from the drawing-room reached their ears. Ella, who was aching to be there, tried not to hear. But suddenly, as the sound of a violoncello came to her, she deliberately walked her queen within the open castle gates of the enemy, saying with unconscious longing in her voice, 'That is Uncle Vincent playing. Nobody can play like him.'

'Look out for your queen, Miss Elphinstone,' growled the professor.

Ella laughed. Her finger was still on the piece; and as she availed herself of her opponent's good-natured warning, and removed the queen out of danger, she tried to show her gratitude by resolutely confining her attention to the business in hand. She again bent all her energies upon the game, and to

such good purpose that she had the proud triumph of defeating her great antagonist.

‘Well done, Miss Elphinstone!’ laughed the professor, gleefully rubbing his hands. ‘We must have another combat, you and I. No, no, not now. You are dying, I know, to attend the concert, and this game has so waked me up that I almost think I could enjoy it too. I used to like music long ago, before these musical maniacs turned the keyboard of the pianoforte into a platform for the performance of their unmusical calisthenics. Do you play, Miss Elphinstone?’

‘Only a very little,’ hastily responded Ella, with sudden fright.

‘A very little is just about the quantity I can usually take in,’ calmly rejoined Dr. Schultz, leaning upon her shoulder, as they took their way to the drawing-room.

On their arrival, to Isobel’s consternation, the professor marched straight up to the doctor, who stood by the piano. ‘Look here, Wilmott, your niece has been playing *with* me for the last half-hour, now I want to change the game, and have her play *to* me.’

The squire, glancing at Ella, saw the frightened, pleading look in her eyes. He had never asked her yet to play in public, and he would not have her forced. But as he turned to beg her off from his friend he hesitated. The stiff formality and cynical hardness of the professor’s look and manner had changed. A touch of something like warmth and animation had roused him from his half-sleepy indif-

ference, and in the awakened face Dr. Wilmott fancied he could recognize the one-time genial chum he had never forgotten throughout the long years that had intervened since their college days, years which had changed the proud, sensitive young collegiate into the hard, self-contained man of science. 'I declare it's the old Max Schultz himself!' muttered the doctor, staring at his friend, now fully engaged in a bantering chat with Charlie. 'And if it is that elf who has resurrectioned the chrysalis from its dry-dust shroud, I wish---' He broke off, and turning to Ella, whispered, 'If you thought you could play *Home Sweet Home* on your violin with me, I should be very pleased, but if you would rather not, I won't have you teased'

'Do play, Ella,' pleaded Gwenneth, 'I so want to hear your violin. Charlie says it is pretty sometimes, when you're not tuning it.'

It had not needed this last request to make Ella resolve without any fuss to do her best. Dr. Wilmott's 'I should be very pleased' had been enough. And yet it cost her no small effort to conquer her timidity, so as to be able to say, 'I should like to try, Uncle Vincent.'

But the lesson she had learnt from Gwenneth that afternoon stood her now in good stead. It was indeed no small comfort to remember that even in such a trifling matter as this she might ask her Father for help to get through her task.

And never had she played so well. Inspired no less by her longing to please her uncle than by the

rich deep chords of the 'cello^o accompaniment, she was carried away by pure delight, and her small fingers tingled with true musical enthusiasm, while at the touch of her bow the plaintive notes of the sweet old melody seemed to fill the room with their strange mingling of pathos and gladness.

'Thank you, Miss Elphinstone,' said the professor, dashing a tear from the corner of his dimmed eyes; 'I haven't known the meaning of your song for the last forty years. But I should imagine from your playing that *your* home is a happy one.'

Isobel shook her head. 'Not now,' she said in a sorrowful undertone, 'for this happy place is not my home. I have no real "Home, Sweet Home."' Suddenly she checked herself, looking doubtfully into the keen face of the old scientist.

'Go on,' he said, misunderstanding her hesitation, 'you are quite safe. I shall tell no tales.'

She glanced shyly round. Only Dr. Wilmott and Gwenneth were within earshot, the latter sympathetically squeezing her friend's hand.

'It was only that I remembered that it was hardly true to say I had no real home, for I have another, and it is a happy one. I mean heaven, you know.'

CHAPTER X

THE SQUIRE'S BIRTHDAY

H DAY or two after the archery fête, as Dr. Schultz was sunning himself on the lawn in front of the Manor, the indomitable Lancelot, spying him from afar, rushed up, and ruthlessly broke in 'upon the professor's scientific cogitations.

'I say, Mr. Schultz, you know, don't you, that next Friday is Uncle Vincent's birthday?'

'I know now; I didn't before.'

'Oh, then, that's all right, for you won't have got your present for him. I was afraid you had, and that it might be the same as mine,' and Lance walked off with a mind relieved at the expense, as it seemed, of the professor's, whose turn it now was to be weighed to the earth with the thought of what would evidently be expected of him on Friday next.

But Dr. Schultz was not the only one who was destined to suffer anxieties on that score. As the intervening days succeeded each other, and Ella's

patient search for the missing Indian letter was still unrewarded, her heart began to fail her. Nevertheless she indefatigably pursued her quest, spending nearly all her spare hours, and even her odd minutes, over the faded heaps of letters and papers.

The foreign stamps had helped her in distinguishing the Indian from the home correspondence, and at first she had believed her task would after all prove less laborious than she had anticipated. But after a second fruitless examination of the contents of the long thin envelopes addressed in the bold masculine hand she had soon learnt to recognize as the doctor's, the conviction forced itself upon her at length that, if the letter containing the Indian grass existed at all, it must have been re-enclosed in an envelope other than its original wrapper.

With unabated zeal she now set herself to examine every document in the great chest. Many a basketful of letters she carried upstairs, where in the quiet of her own or Mrs. Fortreaves' room she would toil on at her labour of love, until her head and eyes ached with the strain.

On the Thursday preceding Dr. Wilmott's birthday she got up very early. Three great packets of comparatively modern-looking letters, which had as yet been only superficially glanced over, were all that now remained to be examined. First one and then a second Ella had laid aside with a sigh that told of fresh disappointment, when the gong for breakfast interrupted further search.

Shortly before luncheon Lance, who had been

hunting in vain for his cousin downstairs, unceremoniously put his head into her room, the floor of which was carpeted at her feet with loose papers three envelopes deep. At the window stood Ella with feverishly flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, in her hand a sheet of torn, thin foreign paper, in which lay a tuft of curiously thick-fibred grass.

'Hollo, there, old Cinder; I want to know this very minute what will make white black.'

'A lie,' absently answered Isobel, with a vague idea that the question was one of the young gentleman's highly original conundrums. 'But oh, Lance, do go away, please. I am busy—at least, I---I--I was busy. I—I am——'

'Hardly civil to your visitor. Yes, I know that. What I don't know, and what I want to know, is what will make a white thing black.'

With her eye on the handwriting covering the sheet of paper in her hand, Ella made a second and still vague attempt. 'Ink,' she said, her mind engrossed with her own exciting discovery, and her one longing at that moment being that Lance would take himself off.

Which he did, muttering, as he banged the door behind him, 'Of course; ink's the very thing! Duffer that I was not to think of it before!'

Lancelot Wilmott was late for luncheon that day; and when he did make his appearance he wore a scowl on his brow, and a disreputable-looking kid glove, a cast-off of Mrs. Forrtreaves' on his right hand.

'Have you met with an accident, old fellow?' asked Dr. Wilmott, as he passed his nephew a chop.

'Two of them,' growled the young gentleman.

'Here then, mister, give me your plate, and I'll cut up your meat for you,' volunteered Charlie, with a show of fraternal solicitude. 'I suppose you've been pulling the cat's tail, and she returned the compliment in a "Thank you kindly, sir," with her claws.' For answer Lancelot glared vindictively at his brother, who only laughed. 'You can't deny it then, sir?'

With a ferocious tweak Lance pulled off the dilapidated glove, and exhibited a hand as black as anything short of ebony could well be.

'My son Ham!' ejaculated the squire, in company with a chorus of startled exclamations from the ladies; while Dr. Schultz, putting up his eye-glass, studied Lancelot as some unique specimen of natural history.

'Well,' burst forth Lance, in a tone of suppressed fury, 'it's all that black Cinder's fault,' pointing to his cousin, who sat unheeding, in a brown study apparently, her face illuminated by a smile of gladness which had not been in the least affected by the shock which the rest of the party had experienced on Lancelot's account. 'She told me to do it, and I did it,' concluded the young gentleman, and ground his teeth.

The squire turned to Isobel. 'What black-handed villany is this you are said to be at the bottom of, elf?' he demanded with a twinkle in his eye.

But Ella, amazed, bewildered, and apprehensive of the consequences of her cousin's unfounded accusation, blushed as crimson as her accuser, and remained speechless.

‘Explain yourself, sir,’ said Dr. Wilmott to Lance, a touch of sternness in his tone.

‘I bought a white tie for a birthday present to you,’ half sullenly replied the boy. ‘I didn’t get a cheap and nasty one. It was white silk, a howling swell. (I wanted it good,’ parenthetically added the ingenuous youth, ‘for you see *my* birthday comes on in a fortnight.) Well, old Forty Thieves she told me you had a million of white ties, but I couldn’t find out you had a black one for the patients’ funerals. And the Cinder told me ink would do it, but she took care not to tell me it would turn me as well into a brute of a nigger. I just put my fist in to wring the thing out, and—’ Lancelot stopped, and looked expressively at his hand. ‘I tried soap, and sand, and the scrubbing-brush. And the worst is, I’ve no present now for you, Uncle Vincent, for I threw the vile old thing, ink and all, into the pig’s trough.’

‘If it is your own birthday prospects that weigh upon your spirits and cause you anxiety, my boy, I beg you will not agitate yourself,’ calmly rejoined the squire. ‘I shall see to the immediate recovery of that black-and-white silk tie, and have it ironed out, and all ready for this day fortnight.’

A curious medley of gifts, great and small, useful and useless, ornamental and grotesque, were grouped together on Friday morning at the foot of the break-

fast table awaiting the arrival of the master of the house. Dr. Wilmott had not had such a birthday celebration for many a long day, not indeed since the old happy times, wellnigh forgotten, of his boyhood, and he was secretly pleased at this spontaneous mark of regard on the part of the household, among whom the servants had borne an enthusiastic part.

But above all the rest of his presents there was one that deeply touched the squire. It was a small packet addressed in girlish round hand. When opened two letters were disclosed, one the missing Indian despatch, containing the valuable specimen of grass, in the study of which the professor became immediately absorbed, the other a short note in Isobel's handwriting

'Dear, *dear* Uncle Vincent,'

'I had no birthday present for you. I tried instead to find your Indian letter with the withered weeds. I was so very glad when I found it at last.

'Do you remember a talk we had one Sunday, uncle, about the King of kings being willing to receive us into His kingdom even though we were not fit? I said God didn't mind though we weren't fit. But Mrs. Maynard told me I was wrong there. She says that you were right, and that the King does mind, and so *He* makes us fit Himself. I cannot put it right, for I am not clever enough; but there are two stories in the Bible that explain it all beautifully. The one is in Matt. xxii, about the man that wasn't

willing to be made fit, and the other is in Zech. iii, about the man who was willing.

‘My heart is not dried up like that old grass, for it sends you a great deal of love for your birthday, dear Uncle Vincent.

‘And I am,

‘Your loving Niece,

‘ISOBEL ELPHINSTONE.’

CHAPTER XI

FOR SUSY'S SAKE

HO, there, Cinder! Whatever are you thinking of? We promised to pick up Gwenneth and be at Myrtle Grange by eleven o'clock, and it's past ten now!

Charlie had pursued his cousin to the housekeeper's room, where indeed she was generally to be found in the mornings after her early violin lessons

'You must go without me, Charlie. I'll come later. I've all these apples to pare, and then to change my dress, and——'

'Bother the old apples. Let somebody else do 'them. You are always acting Cinderella now for old Forty Thieves, or somebody,' grumbled the boy impatiently. 'What's the use of spoiling our last days here? There aren't so many left now,' he ended, catching up a handful of apple-parings, and tossing them recklessly about.

Isobel's face sobered. 'Charlie,' she asked anxiously, 'is it fixed, do you think, about our going back to London? I know Cousin Frances had a letter from Aunt Florence this morning. Do you know what was in it?'

• The boy made a grimace, which meant no disrespect, however, to the apple he was eating. 'You and me and Lance have got to go back next week at latest for school. One of the girls may stay behind with Uncle Vincent, if he likes. Fan gave the letter to Uncle Vincent, and I looked over his shoulder while he read it. Fan and Bee and the governor were boxed up in his sanctum for ever so long afterwards.'

'Oh!' interrupted Ella, dropping her paring-knife; 'I wonder which he has chosen to stay with him?'

'Fan, of course. Anybody could see she's thought herself mistress at Manor Coombe for ages past, the airs she's given herself! I met the two of them afterwards in the garden quarrelling like two tabby cats. To hear them you couldn't have told which was the lucky one. But then that jackanapes, Captain Travers, came up, and Fan was directly all smiles, and Bee all buzz and stings. I dare say she's just mad at Fan managing to get the better of her pretty face. Well, I shouldn't mind stepping into Fan's shoes myself,' concluded Charlie with a half sigh. 'I never was so sorry in all my life before to go back to school. What a jolly place this is! And what a jolly time we've had!' Ella said nothing, only her head bent lower over the apple dish, to hide the starting tears. 'But I declare it's too silly of you, Ella, to persist in acting Cinder-slavery these last mornings. Nobody will thank you, and you —'

'But just listen, Charlie. Uncle Vincent and the professor have gone to Lynmouth for the day, to see the

old people in the village who remember the professor when he used to come, to spend his holidays at Manor Coombe. I heard them talking about having a walk among the cliffs down there, where he and Uncle Vincent, when they were boys, used to explore the caves and make believe they were smugglers. You should have seen Dr. Schultz's face when uncle proposed the plan to him; he didn't look solemnly a bit, and how they laughed and made fun over these old times! Just when they were starting the professor said, "Wilmott, do you remember the great jolly apple turnovers Mrs. Forrtreaves used to give us youngsters, when we came back from a day's smuggling at the caves?" Uncle Vincent laughed again, and said, "That I do, old Max!" And when I whispered to Uncle Vincent, "Shall I ask Mrs. Forrtreaves to have apple turnovers for dinner when you come back to-day?" he said, "The very thing! The very thing! Max will eat one, and grow into a decent rascallion imp again!"

* 'And, of course, Madame Cook was crusty at the mention of the turnovers, and old Forty Thieves flustered, and so you offered to pare the apples; it's always the same old story,' muttered the boy, with an impatient kick at the unoffending apple basket. 'But I suppose there's nothing for it but to peg away and help.'

A large amount of grumbling and a small amount of helping on Charlie's part, combined with rapid work on Isobel's, and the apple bowl filled promisingly.

'Ah! here you are, honey!' It was the voice of

'the housekeeper, who hurried into her store-room looking worried and perplexed. 'Whatever is to be done now? Poor Warren, the smith, at Morecoombe, has sent to say that his little girl is taken very bad again, and would the squire be so good as to come, for Dr. Marshall is from home, and won't be back till to-morrow. And here's the master gone to Lynmouth, and nobody at hand to fetch him. Miss Frances won't have it that it's convenient for sending such a long way for a trifle, as she calls it, and, 'deed, I hardly know how to press her, it does sound not unbelike hunting for a needle in a haystack. But — but—the little sick one! Poor little Susy! the very apple of her poor father's eye!'

Isobel's lips parted as if to speak, then closed again. She looked furtively at Charlie. But, with quick yet unwilling intuition, he read her thought, and refused to meet her eye.

'Poor, dear little Susy!' again murmured the housekeeper, going to her store shelves to get some delicacy to send the child.

Ella's resolution was taken. 'Mrs. Fortreaves, I shall go to Lynmouth myself. I shall ask at every house until I find Uncle Vincent. I know he would be dreadfully grieved if he knew that little Susy needed him, and no one tried to tell him.'

'And you would give up going to Myrtle Grove for that!' angrily exclaimed Charlie. 'I tell you it's perfectly ridiculous. One would suppose that it must be a duke's child at least, for everybody to make such a fuss about!'

Isobel turned upon him with indignant eyes. 'And do you think that Susy's father does not love his little girl as much as if he had been a duke? You don't know Uncle Vincent either, if you think he cares to help sick people only when they are rich. It's just the opposite. He likes best to help the poor. And Susy Warren is the dearest, sweetest little thing you ever saw. I—' She broke off abruptly. Charlie's more than usual want of comprehension vexed her, and she turned away; and he, the more provoked because he could find no really good arguments with which to combat her resolve, walked off in high dudgeon.

Ella was left to coax away Mrs. Forrtreaves' uneasy scruples about the long lonely walk the girl was proposing to take to Lynmouth. 'You shan't trouble about me,' reassuringly asserted Ella, putting her arm round the old lady's neck, and kissing away her nervousness; 'I am sure it is right for me to try to do this, and you know you said yourself just the other day that if we are doing the right, then we are sure to be taken care of.'

'So I did, so I did,' returned her old friend. 'Then, honey, go you shall, for I don't see nohow how I am going to keep you. It's main true that the squire will be right vexed about Susy. And yet—' She turned her eyes to the window. 'It's an ugly looking day,' she said doubtfully. Then, as a thought struck her 'Well, honey, you will wrap up warm, and, when you get to Lynmouth, if you cannot hear nothing of the squire, take a trap from the

‘hotel, and drive back. The master will make that all right.’

Rather more satisfied now about Isobel's expedition, Mrs. Forrtreaves hurried away to find a warm wrap for the little girl. Ella was following to get ready, but as she passed the window which looked towards the sea, she paused for a moment and kneeling down on the low window-settle leaned her head upon her hand. Outside all looked cold and dreary in the grey autumn light. The restless wind moaned in fitful gusts that sent an uneasy tremor among the stately trees, while at his rough, imperious touch the bright leaves with a patient unresisting sigh dropped tremblingly on the ground. The sun, half repenting of his visit to a world which had welcomed him so coldly, already meditated taking his departure, and was even now enveloping himself in hazy cloud-wrappings, preparatory to taking his journey to more appreciative regions.

‘The summer is gone from Manor Coombe. beautiful Manor Coombe!’ sighed Ella. ‘And soon I shall be gone too. And then for me will come the winter, the cold, hard winter, with no more the sunshine, no more the gladness!’

She sighed again, and more drearily. Suddenly a stray sunbeam darted from behind a heavy bank of clouds, and shone straight into her tearful eyes. She started. ‘I had forgotten,’ she murmured, a touch of self-reproach in her tone, ‘Mrs. Maynard said that our Father can give winter sunshine just as well as summer sunshine.’ And she bravely drove back

another sigh that would fain have come and cast¹ a doubt athwart the brighter prospects of the coming winter.

Five minutes later she was hurrying down the avenue, muffled up in the soft folds of Mrs. Fortreaves' large Shetland shawl, when she encountered Charlie arrayed in a greatcoat buttoned up to his chin.

'Of course I couldn't let you go all that way alone,' he said with gruff loftiness; 'but I shan't speak one word the whole way. I'm far too mad at you for that.'

'Neither shall I,' was Isobel's cool rejoinder, swiftly leaving him behind, as, on emerging from the avenue, she dashed at a running trot down a single-file path by the side of a freshly ploughed field. 'When a person is in a hurry,' she called, without looking back, 'speaking just wastes one's breath.'

It was Charlie's turn to have his breath taken away by the calm audacity of this indifference to his righteous indignation. He was still further galled by the ignominy of being forced to canter behind, yet he hesitated to risk his dignity by attempting to flounder through the soft, slushy furrows in order to out-strip his rival in the race. For a good mile Ella kept ahead, scorn and spirit lending her unusual agility in clearing the stiles and ditches; but in the open road leading straight to the Valley of Rocks, the rearguard closed in and marched grimly abreast of the van.

Half an hour later and the silence was broken.

Ella was making for the carriage-road to Lynton, when Charlie touched her on the arm, and pointed with an expression of dogged determination to the entrance to the North Walk. Ella looked, then shook her head. A storm was coming. The sky, draped in impenetrable black, hung threateningly over the sullen-faced sea, now still with that ominous stillness which is suggestive of suppressed fury, now breaking out into angry mutterings and heavings, as if with each breath it would fling defiance at the wild storm-gusts raging fiercely round the giant rocks that loomed darkly from out the fast-gathering mist. Close by, on the right, there echoed from the depths of Mother Meldrum's secret cave in the Devil's Cheese Ring ghostly wailings and moanings, as if some imprisoned soul were struggling, but in vain, to avert the coming war of the deadly elements.

Charlie again pointed to the giddy North Walk. But again Ella shook her head. 'I am afraid,' she said, shrinking back.

Secretly relieved that the irksome silence was broken at last, and delighted with the prospect of something that might prove adventurous, Charlie magnanimously consigned his share in the compact of silence to oblivion. 'We must go by the cliffs,' he said, assuming the lead with an air of command. 'Don't you see that long ago Uncle Vincent and the professor would be sure always to like that way the best? and to-day they intended to go just where they used to go when they were boys. They may be on that walk now, who knows? And you needn't be

frightened ; I'll keep the outside of the path. If you like you can take my hand and shut your eyes. Girls, I know, can't help being frightened at precipices, and mice, and little things like that'

Submitting to the inevitable, Ella tremblingly began her way along the dizzy walk, struggling as best she could against being driven back by the rapidly increasing tempest, and furtively watching the while lest Charlie, in his still more exposed situation, might be carried off his feet, and thrown over the sheer incline into the abyss, five hundred feet below.

As they turned a sharp curve of rock the wind with a savage shriek of triumph caught them in the teeth, striving desperately to drive them back. Struggling for breath, Ella put forth all her remaining strength and dragged Charlie by main force from the dangerous edge, and as near as might be to the shelter of the mountain of rock that towered above them on their other side.

'Charlie' she cried with chattering teeth, 'look down there! If we were to slip, we should fall right to the very bottom. Nothing could stop us. It is five hundred feet sheer down,' and she pointed fearfully to the black depths of seething waters below them.

'We're not going to slip, though,' returned Charlie. Just you keep your own two feet, and leave me to see to the five hundred down there'

Once more plucking up all the courage at her command, Ella clutched hold of his outstretched hand, and walked on with nervous but eager haste, stopping

only when the more violent squalls obliged them to stand still under the lee of the rocks.

Twenty minutes' hard march, and the little harbour of Lynmouth, peopled with fishing craft of all sizes, lay in full view far beneath them.

'But we're not there yet,' gasped Ella, pointing to the white houses clustering round the bay, while she stopped to tie on her hat more firmly with her pocket-handkerchief. 'There's all that dreadful hill from Lynton to get down first.'

'Oh, in the lift we'll swing down in half a jiffy,' responded her cousin cheerily. 'Luckily I've got some coppers.'

'You forget the lift is off for the season.'

'The passenger car is off, but there's sure to be a luggage truck going down. My stars, Cinder' are you scared at that next? Bless me! don't you know that the ground your boots are making dents upon this very minute is whirling like mad round and round Jupiter or something, all the time going faster even than the lift? You're an awful muff, Cinder Ella. Besides, what's the luggage truck but just the passenger car with the top and sides knocked off for more air? And don't you see it will save ever so much time?'

This last argument told. Setting her lips together, Ella forcibly kept back the remonstrance that would fain have escaped them, and allowed herself to be led from the North Walk to the Lynton terminus of the little mountain railway. A truck with a miller's cart upon it was getting under weigh for the descent.

‘Hollo, there!’ cried Charlie, ‘can you take us two?’

The conductor eyed the would-be passengers. ‘Little miss won’t like it,’ he said, glancing doubtfully from the shrinking girl to the flat, sideless truck, upon which the miller’s unwieldy cart left but little standing room. ‘Her might sit on the top of the meal sacks, or us might get a chair for——’

‘No, no!’ almost screamed Ella. ‘I’ll sit down flat at the bottom on the floor, and shut my eyes,’ and in her nervousness she put into immediate execution the second half of her resolution, and, with her eyes tightly closed, was led by Charlie and the conductor to her self-chosen seat on the grimy floor of the truck.

Grasping Charlie with one hand, and with the other holding on to one of the shafts of the cart, she passed some intolerable minutes of suspense. Then the sound of rushing water swished in her ears, and was immediately followed by the giddy motion which announced that they were gliding swiftly down the steep descent.

Three minutes more, and they had reached the bottom, and our two travellers found themselves in Lynmouth. But nothing would persuade the conductor to accept any of the coppers Charlie pressed upon him. ‘No, no,’ he said, ‘us doesn’t take money for just a-frightening of folk. And her,’ this with a side-glance of approval at Ella, ‘her were brave to take the ride with her heart a-bidin’ in her mouth the while.’

After shaking hands with the friendly manager the

two proceeded at a brisk pace along the village street—there was but one—keeping a keen look-out the while for the two they had come in search of. But they reached the end of the street, which was also the end of the village, without seeing any trace of them.

‘Let us ask at the hotel yonder. They must have gone somewhere for lunch,’ suggested Charlie, who was himself beginning to experience that internal sensation of blankness which the complete omission of luncheon produces on the majority of mankind.

The head waiter at the Hare and Hounds, a cadaverous-looking individual, with the supercilious manner and general uncommunicativeness of his kind, vouchsafed the information that the gentlemen in question had not been accommodated at the Hare and Hounds that morning.

A savoury whiff from the kitchen regions at this point proved too much for Charlie. ‘We must have something to eat ourselves, or else we can’t go on,’ he said, while with both hands he plunged hither and thither among the recesses of his various pockets in search of money. ‘How much does it cost? Grub, I mean?’ this to the waiter.

‘Half-a-crown a head for luncheon,’ promptly replied the official, a sudden infusion of suavity perceptible in his tone.

With an expression of mingled blankness and indignation Charlie looked from the sleek waiter to the handful of coppers which he had disentangled from a jungle of twine, fishing-tackle, and general rubbish indigenous to knickerbocker pockets. ‘The bare idea!’

he burst forth; 'I declare 'it's a perfect swindle. Perhaps,' this with a dash of impudence, provoked by the supercilious sneer which once more took up its position on the countenance of the head waiter, 'perhaps a half-starved, lantern-jawed bunch of bones like you could eat half-a-crown's worth at one go; but this lady and me couldn't. We had some breakfast this morning, that's a fact I know, though I can just barely remember about it now.'

'Half a crown is the charge,' sulkily repeated the head waiter, turning on his heel.

In irritated perplexity Charlie surveyed his worldly all 'Sixpence-halfpenny, all told,' he muttered, still lingering in the hall of the hotel, regardless of sundry tuggings at his coat on the part of his cousin, whose most earnest desire was for the cessation of this painful chaffering

'Hollo, waiter! look here,' he shouted, as an inspiration came to him. 'I dare say you don't know that I'm Mr Charles Wilmott, from Cavendish Square, London. Now, if you will give me and my cousin, Miss Elphinstone, shilling feeds each, we'll settle about the paying of the shillings next time I'm in Lynmouth. And if you're not sure about our turning up again, I don't mind leaving as a kind of pledge, you know, my silver watch, worth thousands of old half-crowns, of course. It's a first-rater, the jollicest goer, and never once behind time, for it gains an hour every day. Now and then it may stop for half-an-hour at a time, but you've only to give it a sounding thump, and on it gallops again.'

'This is not a pawnbroker's shop ; this is the Grand Hotel of the 'Are and 'Ounds,' rejoined the head waiter, stiffening visibly behind his white choker, and promptly withdrawing his attenuated person from the neighbourhood of the persistent young gentleman

'Charlie,' whispered Isobel, her cheeks crimson, 'do come away ! Your money will buy biscuits, and surely the baker will not speak to us as if we were beggars from the slums.'

Charlie, who had entertained thoughts of pursuing the head waiter into the inner precincts of the hotel, abandoned the idea for the present, influenced no less by the prospect of biscuits than by his cousin's pertinent suggestion that, as Uncle Vincent and the professor, when they were boys, could hardly have *often* frequented the Hare and Hounds, seeing that it had only existed for about a year, it was probable they would go somewhere else to-day for lunch ; perhaps to the baker's, where very likely they used to buy buns and chocolate long ago

'And after all,' charitably concluded Ella, 'I dare say that poor waiter couldn't help being cross. He must be *very* ill, don't you think, to be so very long and thin ?'

Charlie's better self now turned upon him, and his heart made a not altogether unsuccessful attempt at smiting him. He indeed hardly knew what it felt like to be ill, much less *very* ill ; but he always made generous allowances for those who did. Back he dashed straight into the hall of the hotel, where once more he encountered his foe. 'Look here, Mr Waiter,

I didn't guess, as my cousin did, that you were going in consumption or something, or else I'd have given you half-crowns just to help you along, only you see I hadn't them. Good-bye.' He lifted his cap, and was gone, before the dumbfounded victim of consumption had recovered his powers of speech.

At the door of the baker's shop Charlie rejoined Ella, who had walked on in search of the establishment where biscuits might be procured for sixpence-halfpenny. The juvenile appearance of the confectioner quenched the hope of his being Dr. Wilmott's and the professor's contemporary, but his biscuits were good, likewise his manners, better still, his information that the gentlemen they were in search of had indeed been in the village that morning. Not an hour ago he had noticed them pass. Where they might now be, however, was beyond him to guess. They were just taking a saunter through the place arm-in-arm, easy like. But if young master was to ask Lifeboat Willy at the little brown cottage down by the harbour yonder, most like as not old Willy might know something. The gentlemen for sure would be paying him a visit.

Here was a clue at last, and full of hope the two unceremoniously left the confectioner's, and finishing their biscuits by the way, hurried to the hut pointed out by the baker as Lifeboat Willy's. There was no answer to their knock, and opening the cottage door, they went in. An aged man, with a smile on his wrinkled, weather-beaten old face, was sitting over a bright fire in the tiny kitchen, one hand spread out to

the cheery blaze, the other clasping something in a tight grasp.

Isobel touched him gently on the shoulder, and he looked round, his left hand still tightly clasped, and the smile still lingering on his tremulous lips. With solemn politeness the two children shook hands with him, Charlie asking with all propriety, 'How do you do, Mr. William?' But this civil interrogation brought forth no response, save a nod, bestowed with the half-vacant expression of make-believe comprehension so often assumed by the hopelessly deaf.

Here was a dilemma! In vain Charlie, going close, bawled into the old man's ear with a shout that brought the juvenile fisher population round the cottage window in gaping wonder. Probably the very loudness of the tone overshot the mark, for old Willy only nodded his head again, and pointed to two seats drawn up to the fire, as if in expectation of visitors.

'Us has been having a grand day, us has,' he said in his quavering voice, and still motioning the children to be seated. 'First there be come the two dear young masters, grown so big and handsome for sure, since these long years ago. Us didn't a think them boys could mind old Willy, but, belike, here be the proof of it,' and opening his clasped palm he showed them two shining gold sovereigns. "'To get coals to keep a roaring fire o' the winter nights," that were how Master Vincent put it, that were,' and the old man brushed away a tear.

With a nod and smile of sympathy Ella now made

her way to old Willy's side. ' But Charlie, determined to make a final attempt to gain a hearing, intercepted her. ' Which way did they go ? ' he screamed.

' Which way ? ' dreamily repeated the old fisherman, who had caught the first words ' Thank the Lord, us be near the end of the way by now, us be. Us whiles sees the golden gates a-shining. And us made bold to ask young Master Vincent about his way. One of them days, he said, so gentle-like, one of them days he was a-thinking he would be a-turning hisself into the narrow road for Kingdom-come Praise the Lord ! '

Pressing nearer, Ella gently laid her hand on Willy's, so hard and withered. They had something in common these two, for they were fellow-travellers on the pilgrim-way. Then, raising her voice to a pitch which, in comparison with Charlie's roar, was in his opinion simply contemptible, she asked, ' Can you tell us, Willy, which way the young masters went after they bid you good-bye ? '

Lifeboat Willy's face brightened. ' That us can, ' he said, and turning slowly in his chair, he pointed out of the window towards the Foreland, the mighty bulwark of rock stretching far out into the sea on the other side of the little bay of Lynmouth. With the gloomy sky above and the storm-tossed sea beneath, the Foreland in its massive grandeur stood immovable in the dignity of its own conscious greatness ; while all along its base the tiny white-gravelled bays and creeks showed clearly against the dark background of precipitous cliff. ' Them be for taking a walk along

"the shore to pay their duty to the ghosts of the old smugglers in the caves afore the tide be a-coming in," laughed Willy, his dim eyes gleaming with a touch of fun as he recalled the merry jests of his late visitors.

Not until long after the children had bidden him good-bye, and hurried away, did the idea enter his dull old brain that they too might be thinking of taking a stroll along the beach to meet the gentlemen about whom they were asking, and it did not occur to him at all to wonder whether the stranger boy and girl would know anything either of tides in general or of the Lynmouth tides in particular.

CHAPTER XII

ENTRAPPED

WHOLLY undisturbed by a knowledge of tides, which would have warned them of dangers ahead. Charlie and Isobel took their way across the Lyn, and thence to the shore, their spirits and hopes greatly raised by Lifeboat Willy's information as to the probable whereabouts of the two gentlemen. In their excitement they forgot, if indeed Ella had ever taken it in, what Dr Wilmott had told them, while walking to church that Sunday morning weeks ago, about the treacherousness of the coast. A few fisher children, playing about the harbour, stared at the strangers as they passed, hurrying along at a pace as rapid as the driving tempest would allow. But, as it happened, none of the other inhabitants of Lyn's mouth noticed the pair of adventurers making for the shore, and soon they were out of sight, picking their slippery way over rough boulders, and keeping close under the lee of the rocks for shelter from the fury of the blast, laden with cold drenching sea-spray.

On and on they toiled in breathless haste, but not

a sign was to be seen of the doctor or of the professor. Ella, worn out and benumbed with cold, would have turned back in despair, but Charlie, with tales of the ancient smuggler-heroes in his mind, urged her on.

'The real caves must be round that point' he said, indicating a promontory ahead of them. 'Not even a cask could have been hid in the baby caves we've passed.'

But once round the said point Ella's strength gave way. Panting for breath, she caught hold of Charlie, who, seeing the state she was in, pulled her within the shelter of the projecting cliffs, which hid them from the irregular line of shore by which they had come.

'There, you will soon get your breath again; and when you've rested a bit, I suppose,' the words came unwillingly enough, as the boy glanced longingly ahead, 'I suppose we'd better give it up, and go back. Whew! what a rage the sea and the wind are in! And they're keeping up the row a jolly time too!'

'Charlie,' whispered Isobel, as she glanced fearfully overhead, 'what can be going on up yonder?'

The boy looked up into the great vault of sky black with a perfectly inky blackness. 'Is it heaven up there, do you think? Somehow it doesn't look like it to-day,' he said, somewhat awestruck. 'It makes one think of a great pall thrown over a coffin. As if some great one had died down here, and they knew it up yonder, and have drawn their blinds down for the funeral,' he added, a curious dash of make-believe and

earnestness in his tone, as he continued to gaze at the portentous blackness above them.

'It can't be a Mr. Greatheart that has died,' rejoined Ella in her dreamy tone, as she followed her cousin's fancy, 'for then, you know, it would be all light and gladness in heaven to welcome Pilgrim home. It must be,' but here her voice sunk so low that Charlie could hardly catch the words above the wild tumult of the wind and waves, 'the mourning must be, don't you think, for some poor lost soul?'

'Tush! Pooh!' impatiently struck in the boy, who now found the working out of his own idea too gruesome for toleration. 'Now, Cinder, we've been resting for a good bit, and if you've got your breath again we'll go back. After all, we may find Uncle Vincent has got round by some other way to the village.'

But, on retracing their steps round the point, they saw a sight which drove the blood from their cheeks. The tide was in. It had indeed been creeping up behind them as they walked, though by their inexperienced eyes the steady advance of the water-mark had been unobserved, their whole energies having been absorbed in the struggle to baffle the fierce attempts of the wind to hinder their progress. But now, as they looked back, they saw the margin of pebbly beach, along which they had walked so securely not half an hour before, covered with green, white-flecked waves surging sullenly against the wall of perpendicular cliff.

'It is the tide!' cried Isobel with whitening lips,

and eyes wild with fear. 'It is the tide, and we never thought of that! Oh, Charlie, Charlie, we shall be drowned! And there is no one, no one to help!' Her voice died away in a moan, and the wind, as if in cruel sport, swept round the bay mockingly echoing the child's bitter cry.

Charlie, boy-like, did not so easily give way. 'The steamers will see us, and take us off in their boats,' he said, but his voice sounded hoarse and strained even to himself, and his eyes wandered hither and thither in the wild search of some way of escape.

'No, no,' moaned Ella, 'the steamers are nearly all off for the season.'

'The fishermen will—' began the boy again, then stopped, anticipating the words that must quickly quench that hope also. 'No fishing-boats would put out to sea in such a storm.'

With the eagerness of desperation Charlie turned, and again scanned the rocks above them. In vain. The cliff-side was as steep and bare as the walls of a house.

For a moment or two the children stood in silence, looking furtively into each other's eyes, and reading there the thought neither dared to utter aloud, 'How long would it be before the cruel sea would sweep into their present refuge?' a tiny alcove formed by two long projections of rock. Charlie, grasping at another frail straw of hope, made a rush to round the further point. It was just possible, he thought, that on the other side the cliffs might slope enough to

afford a foothold. He rounded the armlet of rock, only to discover with a sudden sinking of heart that the waters were beyond. Before and behind the sea had advanced, hemming in its victims, so that there was no escape from the tiny creek. Nearer and nearer the ghastly sea-monster would come; all too soon, all too surely it would close in upon them, and at the last crush out their lives in its deadly embrace.

For a minute longer the boy, with the sense that he had his manhood to sustain, struggled against the wild terror that was creeping over him. Elly had shrunk back to the furthest limit of the little bay, and with her face buried in her hands crouched trembling and shivering on the ground. Once with a violent start she raised her head at the sound of a great wave that dashed with passionate exultation right over the crest of a huge boulder that had dared for an instant to obstruct its headlong career. Charlie had a glimpse of his cousin's face, as it stood out with startling whiteness against the dark background of rock, the next moment and it had again dropped into her hands, but the look of dumb despair in her eyes proved too much for the boy. As the awful truth that they were doomed to death burst upon him, he lost his self-control. Uttering loud cries for help, he rushed frantically to and fro, like some wild animal caught in a net, and struggling to get free. Again and again in his frenzy he appealed to Isabel, but the girl seemed neither to see nor to hear.

'It's cruel! it's cruel!' he passionately cried, as he faced the sea with clenched hands, and eyes that burned

now with fierce, angry rebellion. 'We meant no harm, but good, by coming here. Why must we die? It is cruel! It is unjust! Why—why does God let it be? Why?' •

The words reached Ella. Suddenly she lifted her head, then, springing to her feet, came to Charlie's side. 'God, did you say, Charlie? I had forgotten about Him. I had forgotten God!' She was trembling still, and her white lips could hardly frame her words, but in her eyes there had come the light of hope, which had not been there before. •

The boy looked at her, then suddenly grasped her arm. 'Ella, I cannot die; I am afraid. We must not die. I am afraid, I tell you!'

'So am I,' whispered the girl, shuddering and shrinking back, while she pointed out to sea, where a mighty ocean wave proudly arched its head as it swept landwards, then breaking, dashed itself on shore in a cloud of spray and foam which reached the children where they stood. 'But, Charlie, I was forgetting God', and again the light shone in her eyes.

'Isn't it God that has brought us into this?' half sullenly muttered the boy.

'Yes, and He can take us out, but—' She stopped, and again she shuddered, as her fearful eyes followed what seemed to her the rapid advance of the tide.

'Why are you frightened, then?' asked the other almost roughly.

'Oh, because I am just a poor, weak little girl, not like the noble martyrs. They could sing for joy even when the waters came close. But you know it was

God who helped them to be strong and brave. And, Charlie—Ella's voice had grown firmer now, and the nervous twitching of her lips had ceased—'Charlie, it is the same good loving God who comforted and helped the martyrs who will help us now, if we ask Him. When I asked Him this morning to take care of me to-day, I didn't know about—about this. But He knew, and He is sure to help us, though we don't know how. But let us ask Him again, Charlie, for we are so frightened.'

Kneeling down on the wet shingle, she dropped her face on her hands, but Charlie remained standing at the water's edge, the dim light falling on his face, so dark and moody.

'Pray?' he gloomily asked himself. 'How could he pray?' Glancing furtively at the little kneeling figure at the further extremity of the alcove, he could hear the whispered voice, as the tightly clasped hands dropped for a moment showing the uplifted face. It was pale and wan still; but, with a stupefied kind of wonder, he could see that the wild terror had gone, and in its place there had come a look of childlike trust. He turned sharply away. This gladness was not for him. With dreary hopelessness he felt it.

Half in a dream he stood in the dull apathy of mental exhaustion, now counting the biggest pebbles that he kicked away from beneath his foot, now recalling the trifling events of the day. He had quarrelled with Lance that morning. Ah, Lance! what would he think when he heard that his brother was drowned? He would care a little, perhaps, but

not so much as his mother. His mother! yes, she would care; yet not so much as if it had been Lance, for she liked him best. He was her pet. Would anybody ever know what had become of them? Would it matter though they didn't? How long would it be before the sea came in upon them? How long would it take to rise and rise—? He shivered, involuntarily recoiling a step at the approach of a great wave, swelling high with pride in its display of deadly power, and curling with cruel disdain in the pause before it should dash itself forward and onward towards its cowering victims.

A hand was laid suddenly on the boy's shoulder. 'Charlie, oh, Charlie!' The voice was shaken, but not with fear this time. 'Charlie, do you know I think the waves are not really coming any nearer. We have been here a long time surely, and see the water-mark is no higher than when we came. Do you remember Uncle Vincent telling us that there were one or two of the tiny coves where the tide never comes quite in, except sometimes in spring? Oh, can it be——?'

She stopped short, unable to put into words the hope which had come to her. Into the boy's face the hot colour flushed, then paled and flushed again. He said not a word. But, as he planted his feet more firmly on the shingle, as if to steady himself, and watched with strained eyes and set face the slow rise and fall of the waves, there came to him also a faint glimmer of hope.

Hand in hand the two stood in silence, their whole

mental powers held in tension by the alternations of hope and fear. At last Charlie drew out his watch. As he did so there returned to his mind the scene of an hour or two ago at the Harle and Hounds. 'I am glad I went back, and spoke civilly to the fellow,' he muttered to himself, then wondered vaguely how he could think of such a thing at such a time. A quarter of an hour passed. Charlie slipped his watch back into his pocket. Pointing significantly to the stone he had laid at the water's edge, he glanced at Isabel, then hastily looked away. 'It's no nearer,' he said hoarsely, then, with a sudden reaction that left no room for pride, he turned abruptly away, and sobbed like a girl.

Ella neither saw nor heard. With her gentle eyes turned now to the wild, troubled sea now to the lowering sky overhead, she stood with clasped hands, her mind in a dreamy maze, as she thought of the wonderful way in which their Father in heaven had come to their help. Presently a feeling of exhaustion crept over her, and sinking wearily on the shingle, she leant her head against the rock behind her.

And so Charlie found her a few minutes later, when, having recovered his composure, he bethought himself of her. 'Dead-beat?' he asked in a would-be matter-of-fact tone. 'What's to be done now?' he went on, striving with an increased assumption of manliness to atone for his recent breakdown. 'Look there,' pointing again to his tide-measuring stone, 'if anything the water-mark has gone back a trifle; but it will be ages, I suppose, before it goes back far enough for us to



walk on dry land to Lynmouth again. And you are at the end of your tether already with cold and everything, and, as sure as my name is Charles, it is going to rain cats and dogs in less than no time.'

Isobel raised her head. 'Charlie,' she said, compunction in her voice, 'we have not said "Thank you" to our Father. We must do that first, and then we can ask Him to help us for the rest.'

The boy said nothing, nor did he follow her example, as for the second time she knelt upon the shingle; but while he stood and waited, furtively watching her, he kept his hat in his hand, as if he imagined himself to be in church.

Ella rose to her feet; in her face the eagerness of an idea. 'Charlie, do you not think it is possible that if we shouted somebody might hear us somewhere? The wind has fallen, and even the sea is not making the noise it did.'

'We might try, but—' A shake of the head testified to Charlie's feebleness of faith. Nevertheless, he gave the suggestion his support, and, truth to tell, good three-fourths of the shouting was done, and well done too, by him, to the credit of a true Britisher. Pausing to take breath and rest for a minute, he bethought him of a flag of distress. Borrowing Ella's shawl, and fastening it along with their pocket-handkerchiefs to the end of his walking-stick, he waved the signal in the direction of a far-off speck, which they took to be a vessel.

More lustily than ever he was shouting, his eyes on the distant speck, when his arm was seized with

a suddenness that caused an abrupt explosion of the mighty roar his throat and lungs had been preparing for. 'Hush! was not that some one shouting back from the cliffs over our heads?' and Ella strained her eyes, as if in her excitement she fancied she could pierce the wall of rock above her

'Pooh! nonsense!' returned the boy, listening, however, for a moment or two to please her.

All was silent. Nothing but the fitful moaning of the exhausted wind, and the sullen surging of the waves beating on the shore, were to be heard.

'Try another great shout!' cried Isobel, still unconvinced.

Once, twice, they sent their united voices into the air; but, before they could get breath for a third attempt, a call that sounded muffled and far away came to their straining ears. 'Ahoy, there! ahoy!'

Nothing was to be seen for the overhanging crags. but Charlie, rushing frantically first to one point and then to the other, found to his joy that the water had receded sufficiently to admit of his wading round the further corner, where he landed in a larger but less sheltered cove, above which the rocks uprose in a straight ascent to the top, where he could faintly descrie two figures standing on the ridge.

There was something familiar in their appearance. The boy rubbed his bewildered eyes. 'Could it be?' Yes; and now there came again the call, clearer, and in quite unmistakable tones. 'It is Uncle Vincent and the professor!' And Charlie, in delighted excitement, waved the grey shawl in eager salute. But there was

no answering recognition on the part of the gentlemen. With cap tied down over his eyes, and his flag of distress flapping about his head, the boy might have passed for any wrecked waif cast up by the stormy breakers.

'Round the next two points,' called out Dr. Wilmott, putting his hands to his mouth, and sending his words with perfect distinctness through this natural speaking-trumpet 'There is water, but shallow. You can wade through it. Beyond the second point the Foreland can be scaled. I shall be there to help you.' Another moment, and the speaker, with a wave of his hand in the direction he had indicated, had disappeared, hidden from view behind intervening crags.

'What was to be done?' Charlie asked himself in some dismay, as he thought of Ella. But there was no help for it. She must come. But he wouldn't tell her that it was Uncle Vincent. The news would make her lose her head, and the next would be that she couldn't keep her feet. 'Ella, Ella, come!' he shouted 'Come along! There's a man up there, and he called down that we are to get round the next two points farther on, and then we can climb up the Foreland, and he will help us.' And as she joined him he seized her hand, and hurried her along.

'Who did you say it was?' panted Ella, as they plodded on through the soft wet sand and shingle.

'A man; no, there's two of them. Now, here's Point No. 1. See, Cinder, there's water; but he says it's shallow. Never mind about shoes and stockings; they'll dry to-morrow.'

‘But Isobel shrank back. ‘Oh, Charlie,’ she ventured timidly, ‘would it not be better, after all to wait for the tide going quite back? It wouldn’t be many hours surely, and we shall not be so very much colder, if the rain does not come.’

‘But we are freezing now, and the rain has almost come. I felt a drop. We must go. He said it,’ urged the boy. But still Isobel hesitated, now looking fearfully at the sullen, cold water, now glancing back half regretfully at the shelter they had left. Growing desperate, Charlie staked his last card. ‘It’s Uncle Vincent. He’s the man that said we were to do it.’

For an instant or two the girl stared as if stupefied.

‘Now if you go and take hysterics, we’ll have to stay here all night,’ began Charlie with considerable severity.

But Ella did not take hysterics. Quite the contrary. Awaking from her stupor of surprise, she took an eager step towards the belt of waters. With one hand clasping her cousin’s, and with the other holding up her skirts, she plunged bravely into the tide without a tremor of fear, or even of recoil from the shock of the water’s sudden chill. Once more on terra firma, she pressed on with an eager haste that more than satisfied Charlie as to the success of the stimulus he had ventured to apply. One more plunge, and the two, cold and dripping, found themselves at the base of a sloping crag, down which they could see the figure of a man clambering with the swift sure-footedness of an Alpine climber. Only once the mountaineer risked missing his footing. Glancing down to

see if there were any signs of the urchin he was taking some trouble to befriend, he saw and recognized the pair standing waiting for him on the shingle. 'In the name of wonder!' he ejaculated, with a start of mingled astonishment and dismay. Then, with the instinct of the true Alpine climber, he drove from him all unnecessary speculation, and thought of nothing else just then but his downward path.

Five minutes more and he stood beside the children. 'Well,' he said, wiping his heated brow, and speaking with as much composure as if they and he had met under the most natural and to-be-expected circumstances, 'if I had not practised travelling on this break-neck road in my boyhood, I should not have been able to get you out of this so easily. Now then for the ascent.'

He spoke rapidly, and in a tone of careless lightness, assumed to hide his deeper feelings. One glance at the children's pale moved faces told him that they had been in peril. He dared not trust himself to think of it, nor would he ask questions, the answering of which might unnerve them all. There was work yet to be done, and the quicker the better, for he could see that already Ella was shivering from cold.

'Charlie, boy, I must give my whole strength to this dripping elf. I believe there is enough of the man in you not to disdain holding on to my coat, eh?'

'But what if I drag you down?' asked the boy doubtfully, as he gazed at the alarmingly steep incline down which his uncle, with the agility of a chamois, had descended.

‘No fear of that. Put a stout heart to a stiff brae. You are a born mountaineer. if I mistake not, Master Charles, and one day you will laugh at this little feat yet, for we are going to have an Alpine tour together, you and I; and when we come back from scaling Monte Rosa, this will seem like child’s play.’ •

Charlie was ready now for the goat scramble, and he performed it right famously, taking care to obey the doctor’s order not to look behind until he gave the word.

As for Isobel, at the sight of her Uncle Vincent all fears had vanished, and not even the trembling of her weary limbs gave her the least apprehension. as she realized what lay before her. How she got up that dizzy height she could never afterwards recollect. Upheld by a strong and steady hand, she felt herself mounting up and up, now swung right over a slippery ledge, now half dragged, half lifted over a jagged cliff, until at the top a pair of outstretched hands lifted her over the ridge of projecting cliff

‘Thank God!’ It was the professor’s voice.

‘Amen!’ responded Dr. Wilmott with a deep-drawn breath; then, as if moved by some irresistible impulse. he lifted his hat and bowed his head with involuntary reverence. The next instant he had thrown off the weight of this momentary rush of irrepressible feeling, and was himself again.

‘Now the first thing to be done,’ he said, ‘is to get these adventurers into dry shoes and stockings, and then home as fast as horses’ feet can take us.’

But at this point there rushed into Isobel’s recol-

lection the trouble which had been the cause, in the first instance, of bringing about the present circumstances 'Oh, but, Uncle Vincent, there is little Susy. Poor little Susy! Won't you go quick to her?'

Already Dr. Wilmott had begun to hurry his party in the direction of the village, and without allowing a moment's stoppage, he looked questioningly at Charlie. for Ella's chattering teeth made her eager words wellnigh incoherent.

'It's the smith's little girl at Morecoombe. She's awfully ill. The doctor is gone off somewhere, not to be back till to-morrow, and they sent for you. We came to look for you, at least the Cinder *would* do it, for there seemed to be nobody else, and I came to look after her. Lifeboat Willy told us you had gone to the caves, and we went there too to find you, without thinking of the tide, till we saw it had come in behind us and we couldn't get back, and it was in front, and then——'

The boy stopped short. Something in his throat threatened to choke him. He drew a quick gasping breath, and turned away his head.

'And then?' remorselessly asked the doctor, intent on hearing more.

'And then,' Charlie answered huskily, 'and then—then she prayed. We were in a little bay, and the tide went back without coming in upon us. And then we shouted and you heard us.'

It was a simple boyish recital; but how much lay behind these commonplace words, 'And then she prayed!'

'For a few moments there was silence. Ella had heard not a word of her cousin's account. Even with the help of her uncle on the one side and the professor on the other, she was almost overcome with fatigue, as they raced over the uneven downs above the cliffs, and finally descended the path to the village. But she knew that the doctor held her hand with a clasp that told of something more than mere medical anxiety for her welfare, and the touch gave her strength to keep up

At last they stopped at a small villa on the outskirts of Lynmouth. 'Max you remember our old nurse Jenny?' asked Dr. Wilmott, turning to the professor after knocking at the cottage door. 'She married the butler, and they are well-to-do folk now.—Ah! Mrs Jones,' as the door was opened by a trim little woman. 'I have brought you' two drowned rats. Please see to them; and, Max'—this to the professor, who was shaking hands warmly with the comely matron, whose face recalled pleasant memories—'I leave it to you to get them home. I shall take a horse from the Hare and Hounds. An hour or so's smart gallop will bring me to my poor little patient.' He was rushing off, his mind absorbed by the thought of little Susy, when he turned back with a sudden recollection. 'Max, haven't I a dinner-party this evening? If so, you must take my place. Probably I shall not be able to return until late.' He had scarcely said a word to Isobel, this eccentric uncle of hers; but, as she meekly submitted to Mrs. Jones' kind attentions, she was languidly conscious—though

how the knowledge came to her she did not in the least know—that Uncle Vincent was grateful to them for their having come to tell him of the Morecoombe smith's poor sick Susy.

Mrs. Jones had one son, a boy rather older than Charlie; and while Dr. Schultz went to order a carriage Master Jones' shoes and stockings were fitted, if such a misfit could be so styled, to the feet of his mother's unexpected guests. Settling them comfortably beside her cheery kitchen fire, the good woman bustled about on hospitable thoughts intent, and by the time the professor returned with his carriage an inviting display of hot tea and home-made cakes was in readiness. Dr. Schultz and Charlie gratified their hostess by a hurried appreciation of her good things, but Ella could do little more than drink the tea which Mrs. Jones pressed upon her.

The drive home was a silent one—that is to say, on the part of the children, for Dr. Schultz and the driver, an old coach-conductor, kept up a lively conversation, the professor preferring, for the sake of auld lang syne, he said, to sit outside, in spite of the rain, which had by this time begun to fall heavily. Within the safe shelter of the tiny brougham the cousins sat in warmth and comfort. But not a word was spoken between the two until about halfway to Manor Coombe, when Charlie roused himself.

'I say, Ella, are you asleep?'

'No,' she replied quietly; 'I was just thinking.'

'I wish one could stop thinking,' returned the boy

with blunt vehemence. 'I want to get the thing out of my head, and for the life of me I can't.'

'But why should you?' simply asked the girl. 'I think we shall want never to forget it. Charlie'—this with lowered voice—'don't you think that all our lives we shall want to remember how God heard and helped?'

'I know you say God always answers people when they pray,' bluntly rejoined Charlie. 'But you know the sea *might* have come in, and—' then hastily, as if he would not let his mind dwell upon the possibility, he made his question turn upon others rather than upon themselves. 'The martyrs were drowned, you say, and yet surely they must have prayed to be saved.'

'I think they *must* have. But mother used to say that the things we ask might not always turn out the very best for us. She said, though we mightn't understand it, yet that what might seem to us the very worst that could happen would be God's very best. Mother said that the night dear father died. Perhaps,' Ella went on with slow thoughtfulness, 'perhaps God wanted us to know for all our lives afterwards, so as to be able to tell others, too, that praying is of use.'

'But, if He hadn't answered?' persisted the boy, his brows furrowed with a frown of perplexity.

'If He hadn't answered in *our* way, you mean?' A little tremor passed over the girl's face, and instinctively she pressed closer to her companion. 'I was terribly afraid, Charlie, afraid of the cruel sea sucking

me away, and choking me to death. But when I told our Father how frightened I was, He seemed to come close and hold me. He would not have let me go. He would only have held me closer if—if—' she stopped suddenly with a half-caught sob.

It was a minute or two before Charlie broke the silence, and when he did his voice sounded muffled. 'I—I—I didn't pray at all.'

'You didn't pray, Charlie?' The words expressed both incredulity and distress. 'Were you like me, so frightened at first that you forgot God could help?'

'No, it wasn't that. You see, I wouldn't say my prayers in the morning, and I— I thought it seemed a mean thing to do it just when things had got to a horrible fix. It was like this in the morning. I always say my prayers quite aloud. If I didn't, I would be sure to get thinking of something else, and that would be an awful hinder. Well, this morning I had just begun, when that old frump, Lance, jumped into the room, and straight off began his at the top of his voice. Now, I had begun first, and he had no business to interrupt. I was so angry, I wouldn't say another word. I just got up and went away.'

'But you needn't have, Charlie,' interrupted Isobel. 'You know God is not like any one else; not like us, I mean. He can listen to ever so many people at once. When you come to think of it, a great many people all over the world must be always speaking to Him at once. So, don't you see, it didn't really

'matter though Lance and you were speaking at the same time. God could have heard you both.'

'You don't know how that fellow can roar,' Charlie rejoined, with unabated, resentment. 'When he likes, he can easily shout me down at my loudest. He's a cad.'

Somewhat puzzled by Charlie's persistent and almost childish harping upon that threadbare string, Isobel began to reiterate, but in a rather weary tone, that God could hear anything and anybody, when she was interrupted by an impatient snort from her cousin.

'Tush! Of course, I know all that quite well. But it's outrageous to have it rammed down a fellow's throat by that roaring Lance. I tell you he's a cad!'

Whereupon he went off into an animated description of his brother's innumerable enormities. Ella hardly listened. She vaguely wondered that he should excite himself over such a matter at such a time, and it troubled her a little. She was not old enough to understand that the boy, with a sudden revulsion of feeling, was trying to lash himself up into a fit of anger, in the hope of thereby escaping from the thoughts that haunted him, and kept before his mind the almost unbearable recollection of that afternoon's peril.

Presently, however, he relapsed into a silence which lasted until the carriage was driving up the avenue of Manor Coombe. 'Cinder,' he said, with an awkward jerk, 'did you—did you say "Thank you" that time for me too, or only for yourself?'

Ella reflected. 'I think I said "us"; but perhaps,' she added with honest candour, 'perhaps I was thinking most of my own self.'

'That's all right. I mean it doesn't matter. I just was thinking—I mean, I think I would just as soon do it for myself when I get home.'

CHAPTER XIII

'HOME, SWEET HOME'

ON arriving at the Manor, the party were met by Frances and Lance in the hall. The sight of his brother had a strange effect on Charlie. Gripping him round the neck with a clutch that nearly choked the younger boy, he suddenly kissed him with a warmth born of some feeling stronger than he was able at the moment to control. In huge resentment against this affront to his manliness, in the face too of witnesses, Lance promptly retaliated by a sounding box on the ear of his unwarrantably demonstrative relative, the violence of which restored the latter to his natural self. He returned the blow with interest, merely for the sake of good comradeship; then, letting his fists drop at his side, he stood and gazed at Lance, and there was that in his face which arrested the other's uplifted hand, and produced within him a curious sensation, half of fear, half of wonder, for which he could not in the least account.

'What is it, old fellow?' he asked in an undertone, surveying Charlie doubtfully. Then, as an idea struck him, 'Has anybody licked you? Because, if he has, I'll——'

Interrupting the threat, Charlie linked his arm in his brother's. 'Come along, and I'll tell you all about it,' he said, and marched him off upstairs. But, at the door of the room they shared together, Charlie suddenly withdrew his arm. 'Wait outside for a minute,' he said, and entering the room he unceremoniously slammed and locked the door in Lance's face, who was left for more than the promised minute to kick his heels in the passage, and speculate as to the meaning of the low murmur of his brother's voice, which came faintly to him as he put his ear to the keyhole.

Isobel had meanwhile been sharply taken to task by Frances, who demanded to know where she and Charlie had been.

'At Lynmouth,' the little girl had replied, and would have passed on to follow the boys upstairs, but her cousin detained her.

'An old man came this afternoon asking for some medicine which he said the squire had promised to let him have. Did you get any message from my uncle about this?'

Ella stood aghast. 'Uncle Vincent asked me to take it to old John! And we passed his cottage on our way to Lynton. But I quite forgot. I am very sorry. I shall take it now,' she meekly added, forgetting for the moment the lateness of the hour and her own utter weariness both of mind and body.

But even Frances for once showed some consideration. 'There is no need for that. You look as if you had done enough for one day. It must do when

Robert takes the letters to the post. But I cannot think how you can be so carel^{ess} of Uncle Vincent's wishes, Ella, after all his kindness to you.'

At that moment the professor, who had been paying the old coach-driver, and ordering him round to the kitchen to have a good supper, entered the hall, and Isobel, leaving him to relate to her cousin the events of the afternoon, began in much depression of spirits to climb the stairs. Surmounting even the overpowering sense of fatigue, which was now taking complete possession of her, was the burden of self-reproach which weighed upon her with the knowledge of her careless forgetfulness, and she, no less than Frances, wondered dejectedly how she could so return her uncl^e's kindness. With difficulty she managed to reach Mrs. Forrtreaves' room; and, to the dismay of the housekeeper, who was resting in her armchair after her labours in preparation for the dinner-party, poor Isobel, a wan, weary, bedraggled-looking figure, flung herself on the floor, and, burying her face in her old friend's lap, burst into a passion of tears and sobs that soon threatened to become hysterical.

Soothing seemed only to make matters worse. The shrewd old woman tried firmness. 'Now, Miss Isobel, you're just fair done up. I can see that plain. Master Charles has just been a-trailing you all over the country-side to your death. And I well believe you've had little or no meat. Now, have you, honey?' No reply being forthcoming, Mrs. Forrtreaves took the law into her own hands. Ringing her bell, she desired the maid to bring a bowl of hot soup imme-

diately, and before Ella had quite succeeded in gaining control of herself she was put on the sofa, and fed mouthful by mouthful with the nourishment of which she was in such dire need. Putting aside the empty bowl, Mrs. Forrtreaves looked critically at her patient, into whose white pinched face a tinge of colour had come. 'Now, honey, you've just got to lie still there, and have a good sleep, and you will wake up by-and-by bright and hearty, and able to enjoy the fine company that come this evening.'

But at this Ella, shivering slightly, drew nearer to the motherly old soul, her first friend and protector at Manor Coombe, and once more, laying her head in the housekeeper's lap, poured out the whole story of that terrible day. Mrs. Forrtreaves, quick to guess the relief it gave, allowed the girl to speak on almost without interruption. Her own face paled as she heard of the two children's peril. But, beyond a fervent 'Thank the Lord!' she hardly uttered a word from first to last, though, from time to time, her hand surreptitiously wiped away tears which kept coming into her eyes. She would fain have persuaded Ella to go to bed at once, but the child was vehement in declaring that she must see Uncle Vincent when he came home, and would only consent, after changing her clothes, to put on her dressing-gown, and lie down on the sofa, where she soon fell into the deep sleep of utter exhaustion.

The sound of wheels and horses' feet awoke her. 'Oh, is that Uncle Vincent?' she asked, starting up.

'No, honey; it's the carriages with the company for

the dinner-party,' replied Mrs. Forrtreaves, who still sat by the fire, shading its flickering light from the sleeper. 'The master will not be back for a while yet, or I'm mistaken. I know his ways. He will bide till he sees the little one comfortable for the night.'

Slowly Ella got up from her sofa. 'I shall go down to be ready when he comes,' she said, trying to steady her limbs as her feet gained the floor.

Mrs. Forrtreaves looked at her. 'You're not a bit fit, Miss Isobel. But if it's downstairs you've got to go, belike it's your grey frock you'll put on, not that pink spider's web, and you so white and shivery. See, I've been keeping warm another cupful of that fine broth for you. Drink it, honey; it will hearten you up a bit.'

In her soft grey dress, with a white shawl round her shoulders, Ella looked so wan and shadowy, when she crept downstairs, that Lance, who met her in the corridor, started as if he had seen a ghost. He looked at her, struggling with a feeling that told him he ought to speak; but, failing utterly to find words, he put an end to the awkwardness of the situation by suddenly shaking hands with her, and then making off with a rush for the backstairs through a door which stood conveniently open.

In the doctor's study Ella found a fire burning feebly, and she applied herself to the task of coaxing it into a cheery blaze. That feat accomplished to her satisfaction, she proceeded to move slowly about, restoring order to the room, which bore signs of having been somewhat neglected. Tired at last by her

exertions, she put herself into the easy-chair by the fire, where she laid her head back and listened. But the only sounds that reached her were those which proceeded from the dining-room, where the hum of voices mingled with the clatter of dishes and glasses. Suddenly a thought struck her. Hurrying as fast as her shaky limbs would permit in search of Mrs. Forrtreaves, she found that good lady wholly absorbed in the superintendence of the dinner arrangements. Ella succeeded in gaining her attention at last, however.

‘Mrs. Forrtreaves, I’ve been thinking that when Uncle Vincent comes home he will be so tired and wet—it is raining fast, you know—that he will want to rest before going to speak to all the people. Don’t you think he would like best to have tea in his study?’

‘Deed, Miss Isobel, I’m glad you thought of that. I am a stupid old woman growing. I never remember the right thing to do nowadays till the time’s past,’ and the old housekeeper shook her grey head dolefully.

‘Oh, but you have so many things to remember,’ responded Ella, with comforting cheeriness.

But Mrs. Forrtreaves shook her head again, while she anxiously surveyed the dishing of the sweet course through the open kitchen door. ‘If I were not so stupid, I might remember a few more. But now, how are we to manage to get the study tea ready quick?’ she asked herself in a slightly harassed tone, she glanced doubtfully from one to the other of the maids who were passing hurriedly to and fro.

'I can easily manage that,' eagerly put in Ella. 'Annie, the under-housemaid, 's not busy just now ; she will bring me what I want. ' The rest I can do myself.'

'Take care then, honey. 'You are fitter to be in bed than tiring yourself running about——'

'Oh, but running for Uncle Vincent could never make one tired,' was the bright reply.

Half an hour later, when all was ready, and the very last thing that Isobel's thoughtful love could suggest for her uncle's comfort had been brought into the cosy study, Annie came with the news that the master, who had sent on his horse from the lodge, where he had stopped to ask for old Granny Hunter, would soon be at the Manor now. With cheeks flushed with expectation, Ella carefully made her tea, buttered her toast, and gave a last look to see that all was right. The minutes passed, but the expected one did not come ; and Isobel, weary at last with waiting and listening, sank down on the rug, her head against the arm of a chair, and her eyes gazing into the glowing wood fire, where the flames painted pictures for her of Dr. Wilmott's face. By degrees, however, these bright visions began to fade, they grew dimmer and dimmer, they were gone—Ella was asleep.

Ten minutes more, and the master of Manor Coombe, softly letting himself in with his latch-key, threw off his wet overcoat in the hall, and, avoiding the public rooms, betook himself to his study, longing for rest and quiet before presenting himself to his 'neglected guests. Expecting to find the fire

gone out, he pushed open the door, which Annie had inadvertently left ajar, and for a moment stood in surprise; the next he had taken it all in with one sweep of his keen eyes, before they got too dim for him to see clearly the easy-chair and slippers guarding the rug; the fragrant dish of buttered toast keeping company on the hearth with the crisp, home-made tea-cake; the song of the tea-kettle on the hob; the table groaning with a tempting display of eatables, substantial and dainty; and the little sleeping figure on the rug. But the sound of his entrance had roused the sleeper. She got up quickly, her bright face welcoming him right gladly. Another minute, however, and her eyes had clouded over.

The doctor took her hands in his. 'I knew, even though you tried to hide yourself, what elf had been at work here. To a weary old squire this is "Home, Sweet Home" indeed.'

But Isobel had something on her mind. 'Uncle Vincent,' she said penitently, 'I wanted the first thing to tell you how sorry I am about to-day —'

Dr. Wilmott's face sobered, and unconsciously his grasp of the small trembling hands he held in his tightened. 'Little one, I too am sorry that your loving effort to do something for me and Susy to-day cost you so dear——'

In her turn Ella interrupted. 'Oh, I didn't mean that. It was that I quite forgot about the medicine you asked me to take to old John Morgan.'

'It wasn't of much importance,' said Dr. Wilmott, half absently, as if old John and his ailments were

not burdening his mind just then. 'Still, the poor old fellow may as well as not have his mixture,' and he stretched out his hand to ring the bell.

But, on Ella's explaining that the medicine had been already taken by the post-boy, he would have dismissed the subject, had it not been for Ella's deprecating, 'Uncle Vincent, I never seem to do anything just as I ought to do. I forget so many times.' There was a suspicious quiver in her voice as she abruptly ended her penitent confession.

The doctor's keen eyes saw that she was overwrought. In mock warning he shook his finger at her. 'A hungry man, they say, is an angry man. So beware how you come between him and this feast, which I trust the elms have helped to spread. But, hullo!' looking about for a second cup. 'If you think the squire is going to act gormandiser alone, you are mistaken.' He rang, and the smiling Annie promptly supplied an additional cup and saucer.

To please her uncle, Isobel drank some tea and picked at the wing of a fowl, listening the while to the doctor's hopeful news of little Susy, and languidly gratified to see how he enjoyed his meal. When it was over, he sat down in the big chair, making room for Ella beside him; and putting his arm round her with a protecting clasp, he gently led her on to give him a fuller account than he had yet had of the adventure at the Foreland. He knew that the recollection would haunt her less when she had told it out to him. All unconscious of its simple pathos, she told her story, little guessing how the firm-set

face so close to hers was struggling with strong emotion. When she had finished with the words, 'And then you came, Uncle Vincent,' silence fell upon them both. •

Ella was too tired to do anything but lie quiet and rest. The doctor also was still, gazing fixedly into the fire, where in the glowing embers he still seemed to see the picture that had haunted him as he rode home from Morecoombe with the cold wind driving the blinding rain in his face—the picture of the two little figures cowering with blanched cheeks and frightened eyes in the white-shingled cove, watching the slow, dread advance of the pitiless tide. And above the sound of the crackling logs in the great wide fireplace, above the roar of the storm which raged wildly outside the Manor, he heard again the words that had been for hours ringing in his ears—'And then she prayed.'

How long Isobel and he sat in the armchair the doctor did not know. With a sudden start he roused himself at last. The hand that lay in his had become very hot, and looking down, he saw with some anxiety, though hardly with surprise, that Ella was asleep, and that on her cheeks two red spots were burning feverishly. He knew that it was more than time he should go and make his apologies to his guests; but he would not stir until the sleeper did. A burst of music, reaching them through the opening of the drawing-room door, roused her at length, and she looked up with a gaze of bewildered surprise on seeing her surroundings. •

'Elfinette,' said the doctor, 'do you know that these people must be thinking all sorts of evil about me? I must get a white tie, and go to the drawing-room, and you—you—' he was feeling her pulse the while, a slight frown on his brow; 'yes, you must get some medicine and go to bed; for I am afraid, child-elf, you have caught a little cold to-day, and I want you to be better to-morrow.' So saying, he went to one of his drug-cabinets, and poured out something for her to take, then took her himself upstairs, where he left her in the motherly care of Mrs. Korrtrcaves.

'Elfinette,' he said in a low voice as he bade her good-night, 'when you pray to-night'—something told him that, tired though she was, she would not go to sleep without prayer—'remember your old uncle.'

Isobel lifted her eyes to his. 'Oh, Uncle Vincent,' she said, almost reproachfully, 'I always do.'

'Is that so?' he returned, with a short, dry laugh. 'Then if what you have been asking is, that he might be uncomfortably shaken in the disbeliefs of years, your prayers, I think, are being answered.' The words and tone Ella did not understand. Indeed, she would have feared that something had annoyed him but for his parting kiss and whisper. 'Good-night, child-elf. You seem to have found a corner in your heart for your lonely old uncle, and he—well, I think he is not ill-pleased.'

CHAPTER XIV

CHOSEN

THE next few days, which were spent by Isobel Elphinstone in bed, were among the happiest of her life, and she felt almost grateful to the feverish cold which had laid violent hold of her, inasmuch as it had been the means of her being surrounded by a love and care of which she had known but little since she lost her mother. There was Mrs. Forrtreaves clucking over her charge like an old mother hen; there was the doctor perpetually coming in and out to look after his patient, and to see that Charlie did not increase her fever by his too frequent and irrepressibly boisterous visits of inquiry; and last, but not least, there was the tender care of Gwenneth and her mother, for whom the squire had sent, with the shrewd guess that the gentle presence of Mrs. Maynard would do far more for the sick child than all his drugs.

It was a week after the adventure at the Forceland before Ella was able to be downstairs again, the end of the very week which had been fixed for the return of the Wilmott party to London. While she was ill,

nothing had been said about plans before her. She had vaguely wondered, in the restless intervals between waking and sleeping, whether the journey would be postponed on her account, but had not cared to ask for information, dreading to disturb her present happiness by hearing how soon for her it would be all over.

On the first evening on which her uncle had allowed her to be with the others in the drawing-room after dinner, the professor discovered her when he joined the party after his evening nap. 'Miss Isobel,' he said with a bow and a smile, 'you are looking, as that Paddy, Master Charles would say, "quite your new self again."' But I shall ask you to prove it by playing '*Home, Sweet Home*' to me. Indeed, you must not look grave and say No, for I am leaving Manor Coombe in a day or two, and I shall want it every evening until I go.'

As Ella still hesitated, with a doubtful glance at the hands which rested in her lap with the feeble look of semi-convalescence, Charlie broke in merrily, 'You won't have the chance to play it many more times at Manor Coombe to the professor or to anyone else, Cinder, for we have to go away ourselves. It was put off a week because of you, but it is fixed now, worse luck, for Wednesday next. Did you know?'

No, Ella had not known, and she breathed more quickly, while her changing colour came and went. Dr. Schultz was near-sighted, and seldom saw anything clearly farther off than the length of his own

nose. It was with no misgivings, therefore, that he walked off in search of the squire and his violoncello. But Mrs. Maynard's quicker eyes saw what the girl's rapidly flitting colour meant. She saw the quivering of the child's lips, and her brave effort to keep back the starting tears.

Putting her arm round her charge, she turned to the two gentlemen who were approaching, and said, with a significant glance at the doctor, 'The head-nurse begs leave to interfere with the professor's musical programme for this evening. She deprecates for her patient any unnecessary excitement or exertion.'

While the professor bowed, and acquiesced to the voice of the law, Gwenneth sidled up to Dr. Wilmott. 'She is not ill again, at least not with cold.' It was Charlie's telling her about the going back to London next week that made her get white and then red. But I—I—I thought you had a medicine that might—' Gwenneth stopped short, half afraid she had gone too far already.

'And you wonder why I have been so slow in administering my magic medicine; is that it, eh?' Gwenneth nodded. 'Then let me tell you, little maiden. The medicine is very strong, and the patient is not; and I was afraid; but perhaps'—glancing at the face that leant wearily against Mrs. Maynard—'perhaps it is time to try a diluted dose.'

Joining the group at the piano, he touched the professor on the shoulder. 'Max, you have never asked Gwenneth and Charlie to ravish your musical soul by their performance of that wonderful feat of discords

which they call a duet on the pianoforte. To hear it is to remember it for life. You need not deprive yourself of the treat by unnecessary scruples on my account. I shall put cotton wool in my ears, and retire with the elf to my study.'

'I have told Charlie that I was almost sure you didn't like his original variations, as he calls them,' rejoined the nowise offended Gwenneth. 'He *will* put in runs and chords as we go along. He calls it improvising, and he says it is what Hans Andersen's, improvisatore and all great musicians did and do.'

'Very likely. I don't know the ways of great musicians, you see.'

Gwenneth went off to talk seriously upon the vexed question of duet-improvisation with the young gentleman whom Lance designated as her 'base partner,' and the doctor turned to Isobel

'Come,' he said gently, taking her hand in his; 'I've got a new medicine for you, Elfinette, to help you to get strong quicker. But you must come to my study for it.'

A look passed between the squire and Mrs. Maynard which Ella did not see. Well content, albeit a little wondering, she went with her uncle. But on reaching the study it was not to his drug-shelves that Dr. Wilmott went for the promised tonic. Seating himself in the easy-chair before the fire, he drew Ella beside him. It was evident he had something on his mind, yet he waited a minute or two before saying a word. At last he broke the silence, plunging into his subject with his habitual abruptness intensified, as

was usually the case with him when the question was one that touched him deeply.

'Listen, child Ella. I want an assistant-housekeeper. Mrs. Forrtreaves is growing old, and her memory, once an excellent institution, is worn into such holes that little things drop out. I want some one who will catch what she loses without letting her see too much of the game. Where can we find the right person? She needn't be either very big or very old.'

He paused, and looked keenly into the tremulous face beside him, now flushing painfully, and he read the longing in the tearful eyes. 'Child Ella,' he said again with softened voice, 'I am growing an old man. I am very lonely. I want some one to cheer me in my great empty house. Will you stay with me, Elfinette, and make it "Home, Sweet Home" by being my little daughter?'

Isobel did not speak. She pressed her hands to her head in utter bewilderment. She had been ill, she said to herself, and in her illness she had had strange dreams at nights. Was this another of them? Would she awake to find it only a dream, a beautiful dream, yet a cruel one, if the morning light but drove it away like a cloud of sun-touched mist?

Dr. Wilmott was a man of few words himself, but Ella's silence puzzled even him, and it was with a slight feeling of disappointment that, after waiting in vain for her to speak, he said with assumed playfulness, 'You don't think so much of this fine plan of mine as I do, Elfinette, eh?'

For answer she slowly slid down from the chair, and stood straight in front of him. Taking a long look round the room, her eyes came back to the doctor's face, and rested there. 'I thought,' she murmured huskily, 'I thought I must be asleep. Uncle Vincent, oh! Uncle Vincent, will you help me to believe it!' Her lip quivered now; and the doctor, beginning to understand, was greatly moved. The medicine was proving even stronger than he had anticipated. Prudence told him it was time to dilute the dose.

'Come back to your seat, elf,' he said lightly, so as to assure her of his and her own identity. 'Faithless little woman! How, indeed, am I to help you to believe that I am a sober teller of truth? By saying over again the same thing in different words?' But Isobel, resting her trembling hands upon the arm of the chair, still continued to gaze in a half-dazed fashion. Her uncle set himself seriously to the task of rousing her from her bewilderment. He drew her to lean on him. 'Listen, child. I want some one to——'

Unconscious of interrupting, Ella murmured hurriedly, a sudden remembrance flashing upon her, 'Yes, it was to be Cousin Frances or Cousin——'

The doctor shook his head decidedly. 'Fine young ladies,' he broke in, 'and old fogies don't fit, I find. No, no, Elfinette; I must have you or no one. I have not been blind all these weeks; and I have seen how, without either of you quite knowing it, you have become the help to Mrs. Forty Thieves that she can



hardly now do without. To be sure I could get more servants to assist her in the little things which are burdens, but servants could not, without hurting her feelings, do for her what you have so quietly slipped into doing. And, Elfinette, do you think that Fan or Bee or servants could fill the place in your old uncle's heart which you, elf that you are, have managed to creep into? I am a cross old bear, I know; but do you not think you could manage to put up with me, for I want very much to have you?'

It was too much, and Ella, weak still, lost control over herself, and broke down, sobbing helplessly. Dr. Wilmott let the breakdown have its way for a time, then set himself to stop it. 'If you cry any more, Elfinette, I shall begin to think that at the bottom of your heart you are afraid of this old cousin-twice-removed. Besides, you haven't heard the end of my news yet, which concerns other people now, so you must gather yourself together and listen.' The first part of his appeal proved the most stimulating, and before very long she was her quiet self again, able to listen and understand as well.

'Long ago, when I was a wild young fellow, starting out in life for myself,' said the squire, in a quiet, matter-of-fact voice, 'Mrs. Maynard's husband, my good cousin George, paid a debt for me, which I was never able to repay in kind. As a bare act of justice to his widow and child, that debt, so far as is possible at least, must be cancelled. I have just, as a first instalment, presented Mrs. Maynard with a deed, making over to her and Gwenneth that pretty cottage

belonging to Manor Coombe; you remember it, a quarter of a mile from the park gates. We are to have it enlarged and beautified; and when mother and daughter take possession of Woodbine Lodge, Mrs Maynard has agreed that you, Elfinette, if you are willing to stay with me, shall share Gwenneth's lessons, while I act music-master to both. Ha! no more tears. I won't have them. Crying makes people ill, and I brought you into the study to give you some medicine which I had hoped should make you better,' concluded the doctor, contriving to put into his last words an accent of reproach.

'Indeed, indeed, and so it has!' cried Ella, realizing at last the enormity of exhibiting tears as her only sign of gratitude and gladness. 'I wish I knew what to say! I—I—I—'

'Bravo!' laughed the doctor, and laughed again. 'Bravo, small elf! You have made an excellent and effective speech. There are blanks in it, to be sure, but I can easily fill them up for myself. And now we perfectly understand one another, and we are perfectly happy. I have ever so much more to tell you about Woodbine Lodge and all that, but I don't dare. You would only cry again,' he said with mock alarm. 'Every minute I am expecting the head-nurse to come in search of her patient, and I had rather she didn't think I have been beating you; so lie quite quiet for a little. You may dream, if you like, but not think.'

But it was not Mrs. Maynard who had apprehensions as to Ella's treatment at the hands of the doctor.

It was in Charlie's breast that unworthy suspicions arose. When a second and still more effective rendering of his duet with Gwenneth had driven all but Lancelot from the neighbourhood of the piano, Charlie discovered the absence of his cousin.

'Where is she?' he demanded of his brother, in a you-are-your-cousin's-keeper tone.

'Who? Cinderella? She's been taken by Uncle Vincent to his study, to hup up castor oil or some other of his vile abominations. I heard him say it myself.'

Charlie made a grimace more expressive than elegant. 'That's always the way with doctors. They cram their cupboards full of their old poisons, and then, of course, they seize the first chance they can get of trying half a dozen of them on some ill creature or other. When you come to think of it, there's not much wonder they kill so many.'

'It's all right if they're hanged in the end,' indifferently rejoined Lance. 'But I say, Charles Wilmott, it's getting horribly slow here now, since you've left off banging that jolly *Dragoon Smashers' March* of yours. Come on, we three, and have a go at bagatelle.'

'You and Gwen can go and begin. I'll come in half a jiffy,' said Charlie, walking off. He had a mind to see what was going on in the study, and with that intent presented himself at the door of the master of Manor Coombe's private room. No one answered his knock, accordingly he felt justified in entering without further preamble.

‘Ho!’ he exclaimed, after a survey of the pair in the armchair.

‘Been sick, has she? Had too much physic?’

‘That is about it,’ composedly rejoined his uncle ‘When she is better, I dare say she may have something to tell you about the dose I have given her. In the meantime ---’

But at the sound of her cousin’s voice Ella opened her eyes, and starting up, exclaimed excitedly, ‘Oh, Charlie, Charlie, such a wonderful thing! I—but Uncle Vincent must tell you; I can’t.’

The squire glanced at her shining eyes. Clearly there would be no satisfying her without complying. Very briefly he unfolded for the second time his plan with regard to his adopted daughter.

‘The Cinder not going back to London?’ burst out Charlie in a bewildered voice.

‘She can’t, for she is now Miss Elphinstone of Manor Coombe,’ was the doctor’s succinct reply.

The boy stared. ‘What?’ he said slowly. ‘Do you mean, uncle, that you have chosen Ella, and not Frances or Beatrice?’

‘The master of Manor Coombe nodded gravely. ‘Does my choice not meet with your approval?’ he demanded, for his nephew’s brows were knit.

‘I don’t understand it one bit. I ---’

‘Nor do I,’ broke in Isobel. ‘For you know I am not clever, nor pretty, nor grown up. I am not even good. I know I ought to be good, and I often try; but—but—but, no, I am not good.’

Dr. Wilmott fiercely shook his head at her. ‘I allow

that just now certainly you are wicked, persisting in abusing yourself for not being a Pharisee, when I've told you fifty times that I've no liking for that self-righteous set.'

Ella did not seem to have heard him. She was silent for a minute. 'I suppose,' she said at last, speaking slowly, as if thinking out the only possible explanation of the mystery. 'I suppose, Charlie, it is because Uncle Vincent is so good he couldn't help being kind to me, and perhaps he thought that, because there was nobody in London that cared very much about me, he would keep me with himself at dear, dear Manor Coombe. But oh, it does seem too wonderful to be true!'

Her words touched her cousin as she little expected. He turned upon his uncle with sudden indignation. 'Of course, I don't know anything at all about people caring for each other, that's girls' stuff, and I shouldn't have minded a straw though you'd adopted Fan or Bee; but she,' pointing to Isobel, 'she's a different thing. And I just want to know, Uncle Vincent, what you think we are to do, Lance and me, without the Cinder? In London she's not quite such a brick as here, for she doesn't laugh much in Cavendish Square; but at her worst, even Lance says, she's not bad for a girl. I don't see how you can have her, that's a fact. I can tell you Lance will be in a way when he hears there's to be no Cinderella to mend up for him, and story-tell on the rainy days. I'll go and bring him, uncle; I dare say you'd like to hear him howl.'

'Stop, stop!' called the squire, as the young

gentleman, in considerable wrath at the wrong about to be done to himself and his brother, was rushing off to summon his partner in tribulation 'We'll postpone the cat's concert until another occasion. You've first got to hear the rest of my plot. A few days ago I wrote to your mother, Master Charles; I asked her to let me have the elf to keep. Besides that, I asked her to lend Lance and you to me for the Christmas, and Easter, and Midsummer holidays——'

The rest of the sentence was drowned in a ringing cheer from Charlie, who took to shouting and rushing round and round the room in a whirlwind kind of fashion that completely broke up the even flow of the doctor's words. He looked to see Isobel oppressed with this outburst; but to his consternation, the next instant found her in the middle of the floor clapping her hands with a fervour that goaded his nephew to fresh ebullitions. In resigned despair Dr. Wilmott looked on. Then he bethought himself.

'It all depends upon the answer from Cavendish Square to my letter,' he suddenly said, raising his voice to a high key of authority.

'In an instant the dance and its accompaniments came to a standstill, and the children, with sobered faces, turned to him.

'I asked your mother,' continued the squire, composedly taking up the thread of his discourse at the point where he had left off, 'I asked her to come, and the girls too as often as they liked, to Manor Coombe in summer. They——'

'Never mind about them,' broke in Charlie, anxiety

consuming his manners. 'What did she say about us?'

'If you undertake to stand stock still like a clothes-post, I shall tell you.' His nephew nodded. 'Well then, it's all right. I am to have the elf for twelve months in the year, and you two fellows for four. Hollo! Whatever is the matter now? Toothache?' for the boy was holding his jaws with both hands.

'No; it's only that I'm bursting! I must go outside to the pantry, and have a yell with Lance.'

But long before Lance or the pantry was reached, Charlie's pent-up steam escaped like the air in an exploded bag, and they could hear his wild hurrahs echoing down the corridor as he raced along in search of his brother.

For a moment or two Isobel listened, a smile on her radiant face; then she crept back, and nestled in her old place beside her uncle. She was too happy just then to know how tired she was, and the doctor, who did know it, could not bring himself to send her to bed. He found it hard this first night to part with his new possession.

'Uncle Vincent,' she asked, lifting her head for a moment, 'does Gwenneth know?'

'Something of it she has managed to guess somehow, and ever since she has been half wild with joy. When you tell her all, I suppose she will go crazy altogether.'

Ella rested her head once more on his shoulder with a sigh of almost overburdened contentment. She lay so quiet that the doctor fancied her asleep, and

blamed himself for having selfishly kept her out of bed, when suddenly she roused herself, and spoke, a little dreamily, and as if to herself rather than to him.

‘I am just like Charlie. I can’t understand it at all. I think it is a little like God and us.’

The squire, who not unnaturally did not follow this rather ambiguous deliverance, was silent, and the child went on to explain herself.

‘I mean your choosing me. You didn’t really choose me for anything in myself, you know, for I am not a grown-up niece, nor clever, nor pretty, nor even good; but just because *you* are good and kind, and because, when I hadn’t anybody to care about me, you were sorry for me and loved me. And even though I make mistakes, or forget things just when I am wanting to please you, even then you are not angry, but you let me try again. Don’t you think, Uncle Vincent, that that is something like the way God chooses us, and keeps on loving us, and forgiving us for Jesus’ sake?’

Dr. Wilmott kissed the pleading face upturned to his. ‘It may be, Elfinette; it may be that you are right,’ was all he said.

Charlie in the meantime had found his brother, and dragging him into a secluded corner, poured into his astonished ears a description of the items that had gone to make up Squire Wilmott’s latest medical prescription.

‘Phew!’ ejaculated the younger boy with a prolonged whistle. ‘We, you and me, are to come here

for all the holidays? How jolly! And she, the Cinder, is to queen it at Manor Coombe! Whatever made the governor choose such a pickaninny, and not Fan or Bee?’

‘Because she wasn’t a Pharisee-prig,’ he said.

‘Ho! He likes the other lot, the publican sort of thing best, does he?’ put in Lancelot incredulously.

‘But that’s all bosh. Pharisee, and Sadducee, and all that old parable kind of stuff has nothing to do with it. The common sense of it is that, of course, it’s just Cinderella and the golden slipper; and if we hadn’t been such asses, we might have known all the time that everything would have to turn out like this.’

THE END.

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